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by CHARLES LONG

LAWLESS LEAD

by OLIN GRANT

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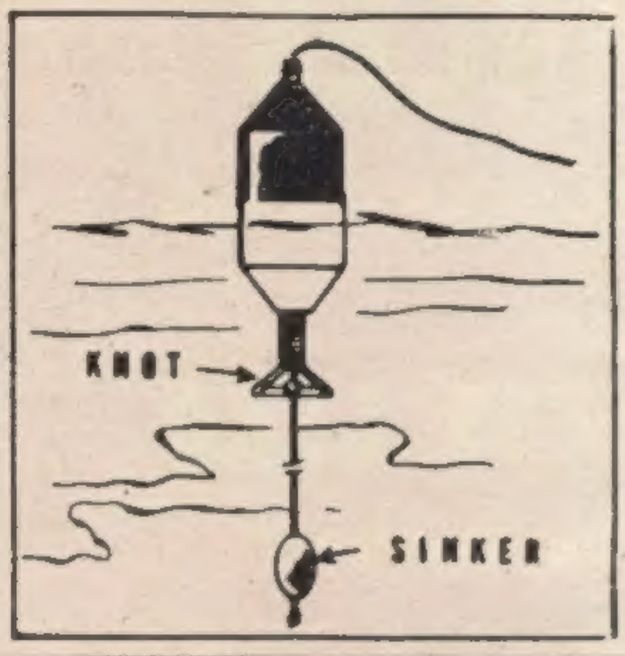

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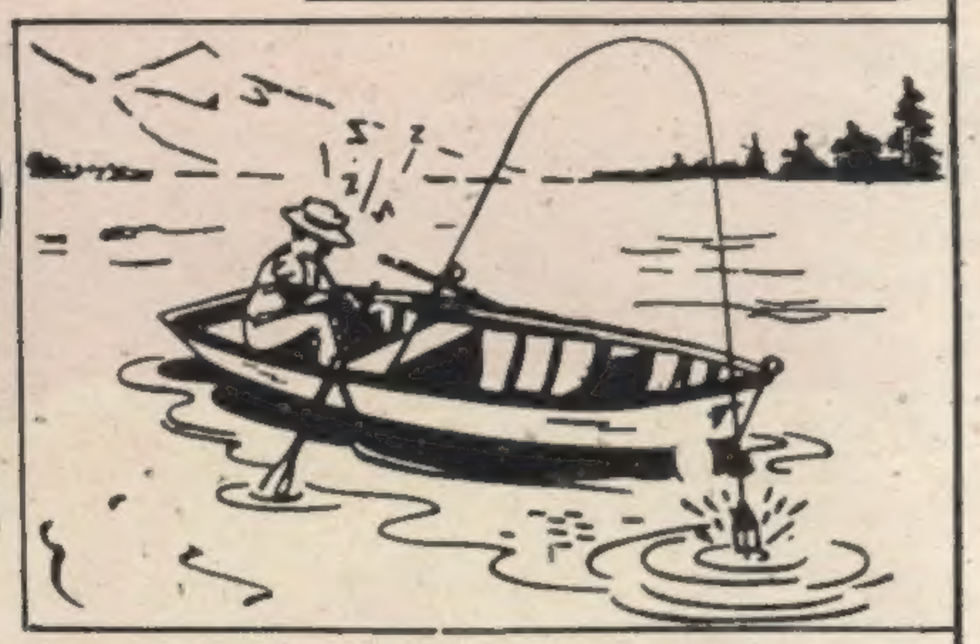

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 25 April, 1958 Number 4

Featured Novel

GUNHANDS AND PLOUGH HANDLES ..... **Charles Long** 8

It had been many years since Lee Bartlett had seen Myra Parnell; now she was Myra Henderson, and her son, Wes, was determined to be a big man. And Lee had to find some way of convincing this lad, who might have been his own son, that the gunfighter's trail — the trail Bartlett himself followed— led nowhere.

Novelet

LAWLESS LEAD ..... **E. E. Clement** 45

Dry-gulch bullets were nothing new to Deputy Marshal Jeremy Harte, but there was one thing particularly disturbing about this present attempt on his life. No one except Ed Danver, sheriff of Clinton, knew he was anywhere around this county.

Thrilling Short Stories

THE STRANGER ..... **Bob Woodward** 5

He came seeking the man who had backshot his brother — Diamond Joe!

THE PRIVATE BATTLE OF JOE BLACKCHIEF .... **M. Michael Sims** 63

It was unbelievable: here was a lovely girl who didn't sneer at Joe Blackchief because he was a half-breed. And Joe had been commissioned to kill her father . . .

NIGHT RAID ..... **Edwin Booth** 73

Someone among the nesters was exploiting trouble for his own ends.

Special Features

THE LAST VICTIM ..... **Bradley Burr** 42

THE AFFAIR AT YOUNG'S SALOON (verse) ... **Edward Garner** 69

TOMBSTONE NO GHOST TOWN ..... **H. C. Ingraham** 70

ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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The Stranger

by Bob Woodward

The Stranger claimed that Diamond Joe had backshot his brother, but forgot one important thing...

OLD FELIX eyed the man at the saloon bar cautiously, wondering what the heavy-set stranger was doing in Cordova. Strangers were a rarity in the little Mexican town—and they never came without a purpose. The man tossed down his drink, turned and slowly surveyed the dimly-lit room. He paused momentarily as his gaze fell upon Felix. Felix returned his stare coldly.

"You know Diamond Joe?" the stranger said as he raised his voice.

Felix resumed his game of solitaire, ignoring the stranger's question. The broad-shouldered stranger approached the card table.

"You hear my question?" he asked gruffly, as he pulled up a chair and sat down.

Felix looked up slowly, sizing up the man before he spoke. "Si, I know heem," Felix answered indignantly.

The stranger was surprised by the sharpness in the old Mexican's answer. He hesitated a moment, then spoke in friendlier tones, "Diamond Joe live around here?"

Felix continued his game of solitaire. "Maybe," he said unwillingly as he looked up. His eyes searched the stranger's face questioningly. "What you want weeth Diamond Joe?"

The stranger avoided his question. "You want a drink—tequila, maybe?" he asked as he arose and walked toward the bar.

The old Mexican got up from the table and followed the stranger. "Maybe I drink. What you want weeth Diamond Joe?" Felix reached for the bottle of tequila the sleepy-eyed bartender had placed before him on the bar. "You got business weeth Joe, maybe?"

"Business? Yeah, I got business with him," the dark-eyed stranger chuckled. He killed his shot of tequila and tossed a coin on the bar. The bartender stirred momentarily from the newspaper he was reading.

Felix lowered his voice, "You no like Diamond Joe?"

[*Turn To Page 7*]

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★ THE STRANGER ★

(*continued from page 5*)

A fly lit on the stranger's nose. Brushing it away, he said, "You want another drink?" Felix shook his head slowly, waiting for a reply to his question.

The stranger eyed Felix warily, but the old Mexican's tan face gave no indication of what he was thinking. The stranger seemed bothered by the stillness of the empty saloon. "No, I don't like Diamond Joe," he said. The sleepy-eyed bartender stirred again as the silence was broken by the stranger's loud voice. He looked first at Felix, then at the stranger, as if he wondered what had caused the outbreak. Shaking his head slowly, he once more began reading his paper.

Felix eyed his drinking partner inquisitively. "You ever seen Diamond Joe?"

"No," the man replied.

FELIX STUDIED him carefully, then turned and spat at the spitoon. "Maybe I have another drink." He poured a shot of tequila into his glass. The stranger tossed a coin on the bar.

"Thanks," Felix smiled through his tobacco-stained teeth. He downed the shot of tequila and walked to the door of the saloon. "Eets sure hot out today," he muttered as he looked into the dusty street. The stranger had no reply.

Felix continued to look into the sunlit street for a few moments. Suddenly he whirled and faced the startled stranger. "Why you no like Diamond Joe?"

"He killed my brother."

Felix eyed him suspiciously. "You theenk maybe you kill heem?"

"You damn right I will. No one's gonna kill my kinfolk and get away with it—not while I'm around."

Felix took out a cigarillo and lit it. He blew several smoke rings toward the ceiling. "I theenk you make beeg mistake, senor."

THE STRANGER'S face reddened slightly. "So I make a big mistake, huh? We'll see about that. You just show me to Diamond Joe, and I'll handle the louse. *He* made the mistake when he killed my brother."

Felix smiled. "You must be very fast weeth a gun, senor. Diamond Joe ees very fast, too."

"He shot my brother in the back. You don't have to be fast to shoot a man in the back—just yellow, that's all!"

Felix said, "Diamond Joe, he ees a killer; he won't like to be called a yellow louse. He weell kill you."

"You just show him to me and we'll see who kills who."

Again Felix smiled. "You weell promise not to tell him that I helped you?"

"I'll never say a word to anyone," the stranger promised eagerly. "Where's the yellow louse live?"

The roar of a pistol cut the silence of the saloon, and the stranger dropped to the floor.

Felix turned and said, "Nice work, Diamond Joe." The sleepy-eyed bartender placed his smoking pistol on the bar and smiled. Felix returned to his game of solitaire.

GUNHANDS AND PLOUGH HANDLES

Novel of Rangeland Mystery

by Charles Long

Lee Bartlett tried to tell young Wes Henderson that gun-carrying was going out of fashion. There was no future for a career like the one Bartlett was now regretting he'd ever entered on. But Wes was determined that he was going to be somebody, somebody tough and strong...

DOWN IN the draw, scarcely a hundred yards away, the boy was so engrossed in what he was doing that he was unaware of the approach of Lee Bartlett's big bay stallion. He had roped and hog-tied his calf with a deftness that had won a nod of approval from Bartlett, and now was busy heating his iron in the small blaze he was fanning with his hat.

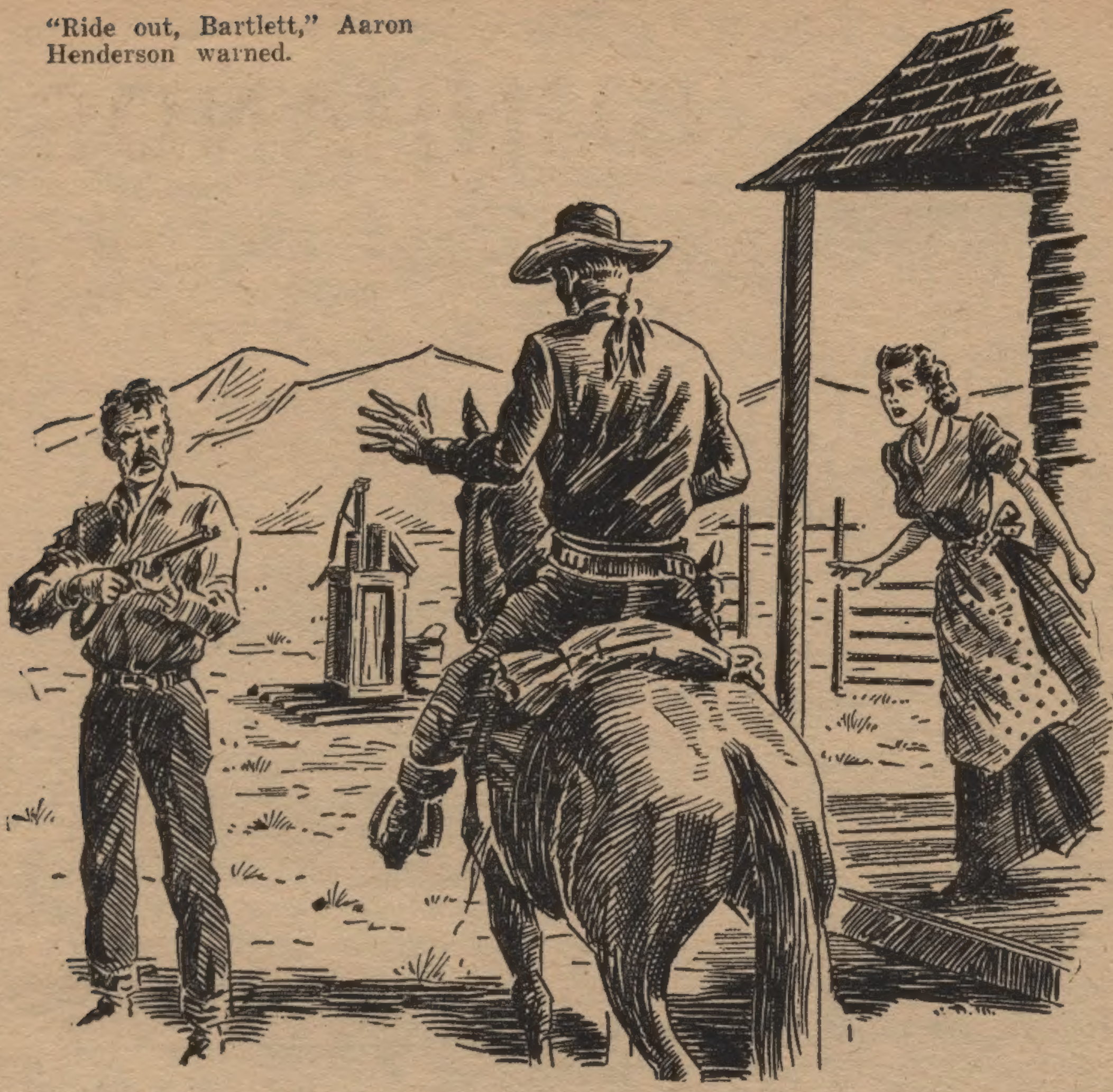
Watching, Bartlett absently rolled a cigaret. He sat relaxed in the saddle; but his steel-grey eyes—from either side of a short, straight nose—moved constantly, alert for any possible sign of danger.

He wasn't sure what he had run up against. The calf on the ground was a brindle yearling—unbranded, but with the left ear notched. A sleeper? Probably. Yet the boy down there was no rustler; Lee Bartlett would have sworn to that.

The boy was about fourteen, perhaps, but big and raw-boned for his age. His blue denim shirt and pants were faded and patched but clean. When he turned his head, Lee could glimpse an open, honest face with a slight grin moulding a generous mouth.

"Nester boy doing a bit of maverick-ing, likely," Bartlett mused. "Ought to be more careful, though, if the temper of the ranchers hereabouts is what I think it is."

His ears caught the sound of horses coming up the draw, and he straightened in his saddle with the cigaret unlit. He smiled faintly as he stopped the unconscious movement of his hand toward the gun at his belt. No one would



"Ride out, Bartlett," Aaron Henderson warned.

recognize him here in the panhandle, except his friend, John Knight.

Now the boy had heard, and his head came up. For an instant there was a look of apprehension in his face; then it was gone. His jaw was resolute as he faced the oncoming riders.

There were two of them, riding horses with a KT brand. Lee frowned; this would complicate matters if—as he had an idea he was going to do—he interfered in the drama unfolding down there.

The two dismounted and advanced on the boy with drawn guns. Seeing that he was unarmed, they holstered the weapons, but the leader and larger of the two still stalked forward threateningly.

After a brief colloquy that Bartlett couldn't hear, the big man's voice rose angrily. "By gawd, we've warned you nesters! Now we're going to show you we mean business. Jed, get the rope."

The boy said fearfully to the smaller man, "No, Mister Tally!" But Tally, ignoring him, had turned to obey the big man's command.

Lee Bartlett put spurs to the big bay under him. "Pete," he said, "I think it's time we dealt ourselves a hand in this."

FOR THE first time, the three down below were aware of the man on the big bay stallion. The two punchers whirled, and their hands went toward their guns; but when they saw the Winchester draped across the fork of Bartlett's saddle, they froze stiffly, with hands well away from their sides.

Lee slid from the saddle with the

Winchester held lightly in the crook of his arm. The two punchers were regarding him belligerently, surprised into temporary inaction, but not cowed. The boy was staring at Lee and sobbing his relief.

Lee drawled, "Looks like I got here just in time to join the frolic."

The big man was the first to recover from his surprise. He was even bigger than he had looked from a distance, a giant of a man with a drooping straw-colored mustache. He would be Catlin, Lee thought—Knight's foreman.

"This is a private party, mister," he said. "You ain't invited."

"I'm here," Lee replied. "What did you figure to do to the boy?"

The big man turned his head and spat deliberately into the dirt. "Same thing we generally do to cow-thieves; we aim to use him to decorate a cottonwood."

"The boy's no more a rustler than I am," Lee said flatly.

The big man's blue eyes gleamed. "Name your own brand, mister. Cottonwoods generally have two limbs."

Ignoring the implication, Lee turned toward the boy. He liked what he saw close up better than he had at a hundred yards. There was a fine chiseling to the boy's face that was familiar somehow. Lee racked his memory and suddenly felt an emotion pounding through him that he hadn't felt for many years. Except for the square jaw and the freckles, the boy might have looked exactly like...

"Kid," Lee demanded, with an unnatural harshness in his voice, "what's your name?"

A little of the fear crept back into the boy's eyes. "Wes, sir—Wesley Henderson."

Lee nodded. The name was the same. The boy probably resembled his mother. Remembering what Myra Parnell had been like before she married Henderson, Lee Bartlett felt his pulses racing. The harshness left his voice.

"Wes," he said, "I think you'd better take up some other line. Maverick-ing's going out of fashion."

"I wasn't maverickin'," the boy said. An embarrassed flush had come into his cheeks. "I was practicin'."

"Practicin' to be a cow-thief!" This was a sneering murmur from the short, dark man, Tally.

Lee turned his eyes that way; he saw the shifty glitter in Tally's eyes, and the cruel lines about the man's hard face, and made a mental note never to turn his back on Tally.

The boy's flush had deepened. He was saying in a pleading voice, "Mister Catlin, I've been scouting around, and every time I see an unbranded calf...."

"You slap your brand on it!" Catlin interrupted him. "By gawd, I'm goin' to show you nesters once and for all that this is KT land!"

Apparently forgetting Lee Bartlett's rifle, Willoughby had taken an angry step toward the boy. Lee intervened. "Hold on, Catlin! Why not let the boy have his say?"

"He's said enough. Look at that iron he's usin'." Catlin's lip curled. "Or maybe you don't know, mister, there's a law against runnin' irons in this state?"

Lee looked at the boy's iron that still lay in the dying fire. It was only a curved piece of heavy wire. He nodded. "That's true, Wes. You're supposed to use a stamp iron, according to the law."

"I didn't know," Wes said.

SOMEHOW, Catlin's snort rubbed Lee the wrong way. "How many of your boys carry running irons?" he demanded.

"That's neither here nor there. They use 'em legal; they don't run unregistered brands."

Lee turned to the youngster. "Is your brand registered, Wes?"

"I don't have a brand." The boy's eyes were lowered; his neck was now brick-red. "Pa won't let me have one."

"Then is your father's brand registered?"

"He doesn't have one either." The boy's embarrassment was acute. "The only stock we have is the horses—unless you count the chickens and the milk cow."

The bitterness in the boy's voice betrayed him: His embarrassment was not caused by the questioning he was undergoing but by shame—shame that his father was only a dirt farmer.

"Then," Lee asked sympathetically, "what brand do you use?"

For a moment it seemed that the boy was going to refuse to answer. Then he raised his head and blurted out, "The KT!"

This time, Lee was at first inclined to echo Willoughby's snort; then the humor of the situation struck him, and the faint trace of a smile came to his lips again.

"Catlin," he said, "seems to me the boy's been doing you a favor. Instead of hanging him, you ought to put him on the payroll."

"I thought he'd appreciate it!" Wes blurted out. "I thought he'd see how good I was doin', and maybe give me a job."

"Why don't you, Catlin? That might be the answer."

Catlin wasn't amused. His scowl had deepened, and his eyes were cold as granite. "I'll give him a job! The same way I'll give any nester a job that uses KT land. Mister, you may fall for a yarn like that, but I don't aim to."

Then the hard eyes focused on Lee. "And that reminds me, mister. You're hornin' in where you ain't wanted. Why don't you light a shuck and let us handle this?"

"Uh uh!" Lee said. He waved the barrel of the Winchester gently back and forth. "I've got an invitation, Willoughby. Or didn't you notice?"

To the boy, he said over his shoulder, "Wes, I reckon you'd better mount that nag of yours and head for where you're more appreciated."

Then he turned his head briefly, to inspect the swaybacked sorrel the boy's faded saddle was on. "And by the looks of it, I'd better give you plenty of time before I turn these varmints loose!"

WHEN THE boy was gone, Lee Bartlett said to Catlin, "You and Tally had better drop those guns and make yourselves comfortable. You're in for a long wait if I'm any judge of horseflesh."

Catlin spat. "Take that plug he's forkin' quite a spell to get out o' range," he acknowledged.

He unbuckled his gunbelt and carelessly threw it several feet to one side; at his sign, Tally followed suit. Catlin hunkered down and calmly began to roll a cigaret. In his philosophy, apparently, if your quarry gets away from you, you wait until another time.

Tally remained standing. Lee noticed that the swarthy man's eyes kept straying toward the horses and the rifles slung from their saddles. Squatting opposite Catlin, with his own Winchester across his knees, Lee began to roll his own neglected smoke. Lighting it, he motioned to the outsider. "Come on over and join the party, Tally. The three of us are going to have a little confab."

"What makes you think we want to chin with you?" Tally said in a surly voice. But he obeyed.

For a while the three smoked in silence. Tally's eyes, when they rested on Lee, were pure venom, but Catlin's eyes were blandly devoid of expression.

Lee broke the silence. "Catlin, you

disappoint me. I've heard better things of you."

The man lifted a shaggy eyebrow. "You've heard o' me, mister?"

"I've heard you're a man who deals his cards from the top of the deck."

"And now you think different, mister?"

"Now I know you're a man who takes his spite out on a kid still wet behind the ears."

Catlin shrugged. "He's old enough to be weaned."

"He's just a raw farm boy from Missouri—too dumb to know that the calf he threw his rope on was earmarked."

"Or maybe smart enough," Catlin suggested, "to know who done the sleeperin'."

"He couldn't have marked that calf himself. Was the kid in your last calf roundup?"

"There was outside reps. Whoever he's in cahoots with could've done it."

Lee said, "You know damn' well the boy was on the level. If you'll promise to let him alone, I'll ride off right now."

Catlin shook his head. "I ain't makin' no promises."

"Then I'll make *you* a promise." Lee Bartlett came slowly to his feet. "If any harm comes to that boy, I'm coming gunning for you; and that goes for your cat-eyed partner."

"We're supposed to be shakin' in our boots, mister?"

CATLIN threw away his cigaret. He arose and stood towering over Lee Bartlett. "If you'll put down that artillery, I'll take you apart, piece by piece, right now."

"You could probably do it," Lee acknowledged; "that's the reason I'm keeping the artillery."

Catlin pulled at his mustache; his eyes regarded Lee speculatively. "I wonder," he said softly, "if you'd drill an unarmed man." He took a tentative step forward.

"Stay where you are!" Lee said sharply. He added in a milder voice, "Put yourself in my place, man. What would you do if that unarmed man said he was going to take you apart—and you knew he could probably do it? And he had a cat-eyed partner itching to grab a gun and back his play?"

Catlin's lips parted beneath the drooping mustache, revealing crooked yellow teeth in what might or might not have been a grin. "Why, mister, I reckon I'd drill the bustard!" He turned and gestured to Tally. "Come on, Jed. This hombre's got all the cards; let's amble back to headquarters."

At Lee's insistence, the two dropped their saddle guns, keeping their backs turned as they pulled the rifles from their scabbards. Catlin only shrugged and tossed his rifle contemptuously aside, but Tally lingered over the job. He was itching, Lee could tell, to whirl suddenly and start throwing lead.

But Tally didn't dare to make the move. His face was savage as he swung into the saddle to follow Catlin, who was already moving off in the direction from which the two had come.

Both turned in their saddles to look back at Lee. Catlin's stare was expressionless, but Tally's was menacing.

"We'll know you, mister!" he said.

"Good!" Lee replied. "I'll be around."

But he was doubtful as, having mounted and followed the two for a short distance, he watched their figures fade from view. When John Knight, owner of the KT, had asked him to come north to help him out in rustler trouble, Lee had been glad to oblige a friend. But tracking down rustlers and hazing nester kids were two different matters to Lee Bartlett's mind.

"If we skip," he murmured, "Catlin

will think he ran us out, but we wouldn't worry about that. On the other hand, we can't run out on a friend. If I'm guessing right, Knight's rustler trouble is in his own outfit. Not Catlin, though, unless John Knight is badly mistaken in his man."

Having satisfied himself that Catlin had no intention of turning back, Lee cut off in the direction Wes Henderson had taken.

"Pete, I think we'd better ride after that kid. If he's who I think he is, there's one more reason for sticking around. We can't let Myra Parnell's boy get himself hanged as a rustler."

- 2 -

WES HENDERSON had left a plain trail, and Lee Bartlett followed it at a good pace; but he was surprised when, topping a low rise, he saw the sorrel with Wes astride it, heading his way. The kid recognized him and pulled up.

"Wes," Lee said, "you're supposed to be headed for home."

The boy's eyes looked troubled. "It was my fight, mister. Anyway, I couldn't leave without even thanking you."

"Name's Lee, to my friends. Forget it, Wes. You can do the same for me some time when Willoughby's after me with a rope."

The boy knew that he was being laughed at. The color deepened in his face, and his lips were compressed as he swung the sorrel around. His line of thought was transparent when he finally blurted out,

"I'm getting to be pretty good with a pistol, mister—I mean Lee. I've been practicing with an old .44 I've got hid out. I'm not so good on the draw yet, but..."

"Hold it, Wes!" Lee twisted in his saddle to face the boy. "The time is passing when a man needed to be good with the plough handles. You stick to your father's brand."

"Aw!" the kid said sullenly. "I don't want to be a dirt farmer all my life!"

Lee only said gravely, "And another thing, Wes. You'd better stay away from KT land after this."

"It's not their land. They only own a few sections of the best water. The rest is public land; Pa says they only grabbed it."

Lee nodded. "They grabbed it from the Comanches. That's the way this country grew from the beginning, Wes—by grabbing more and more land from the Indians. You can't blame Knight and Willoughby if now they think they own it."

"*I* can blame them."

Lee studied the boy's face for a moment, saw bitter lines unsuited to a face so young, then said, "I think we're safe enough from Catlin. Let's hunker down in the shade of those willows yonder. This sun's mighty hot, and Pete and I've been traveling for days."

In the shade of the willows, Lee came directly to the point. "You came from Missouri, didn't you, Wes?"

The boy nodded. "How'd you know?"

"Guessed. Your father's name is Aaron, and your mother's maiden name was Myra Parnell."

"Do you know my folks?"

"Reckon they must be the same Hendersons I knew years ago back in Missouri. They're mighty fine folks, Wes; you ought to be proud of them."

"I'm not," he replied flatly.

Lee studied the young face and saw again the bitter lines that shouldn't have been there. "Wes, your mother's a good woman and your father's a fine

upstanding man. Why aren't you proud of them?"

The kid averted his eyes. "Ma's all right, I guess. Women are supposed to be that way."

"What way, Wes?"

"Weak. And Puritans. Pa thinks everything's a sin—even carrying a gun."

"Gun-carrying's going out of fashion. Maybe your father's right about it."

Wes shook his head stubbornly. "Maybe in the towns back East, but not out here. Out here you've got to be tough and strong. Like I'm going to be."

WES WAS trying his best to look tough and strong, but his mouth wasn't made for it, nor his cheeks; and his chin, though strong, wasn't yet fully developed. But Lee Bartlett wasn't amused. He was thinking of the boy he himself had been when, at about young Henderson's age or a little younger, he had started out to make himself tough and strong.

If he had ordered his life differently, he realized with a swift pang of regret, he, instead of Aaron Henderson, might have been the father of the boy in front of him.

At the thought, Lee felt the blood race through his veins as it had not for fifteen years. Myra would probably be stout and matronly now; but when he had known her, she had been a vibrant, bright-haired, full-breasted girl of seventeen. He had thought that he had forgotten Myra, but now the sight of this boy who so resembled her brought back the memories in a flood.

"Wes," he said, "the last I heard, your father was doing well in Missouri. Why'd he decide to pull up stakes and come to Texas?"

"He was goin' to get rich!" The boy's tone was disgruntled. "But he won't; he never will. You got to be strong to get rich."

"Your father's no weakling as I remember him." Lee remembered Aaron Henderson as a tall, dark, silent man, but lantern-jawed, as his son was going to be. "What happened, Wes?"

"Pa came to Matosca and opened a store, but it didn't pan out. So Pa closed the store and bought some land that was opened up for sale—eight sections of KT range!"

Lee whistled. "I reckon Knight and Catlin weren't much pleased with that!"

"They weren't. Pa had to actually settle on it to get it, but when they ordered him off, he knuckled under. So he bought the forty acres up on Fickle Creek that we're farming now. We eat, but that's just about all; Pa'll never get rich that way."

The boy's face was screwed up into what was meant to be a heavy scowl. "This land we're on right now is rightfully Pa's; some day it ought to be mine. Pa may take it lyin' down, but I ain't goin' to."

"What you figure to do?"

"I don't know, but some day I'm goin' to take this land back again. All of it. But I ain't goin' to farm it, and I ain't goin' to sell it to settlers. I'm goin' to run cattle; I'm goin' to show the Knights and the Catlins and all the rest that a Henderson's just as good as any of them."

Lee Bartlett looked thoughtfully at the boy's sullen face. "Wes," he said, "I'm not sure I know the rights of all this, but I am sure all this bitterness isn't doing any good. You're bitter against your father. You're bitter against Knight and Catlin—yet you want to work for the KT. How come?"

"I got to learn to be a cattleman before I can be one, don't I? Besides, if I ride for the KT I'm on partly my own land. I can look out for my own interests better."

THAT FIGURED, Lee acknowledged to himself; the boy was thinking like a man. Still, looking at his rebellious face, Lee wasn't satisfied. "Wes, were you really going to burn a KT on that calf you roped?"

The boy's surprise was obviously genuine. "I sure was, Lee; what other brand would I use?"

"I just didn't know." Lee hoped that his relief didn't show too plainly in his face. "I figured you to be too smart to make a play like that, but I wanted to be sure."

"Like what?"

"Like trying to turn a quick dollar by running a slow brand. Those days are gone for good. The railroad is coming, and with it law and order. The smart man from now on is going to be the man that does his fighting inside the law."

Lee knew that he had scored his point. He could see indecision in the boy's eyes. But then the eyes narrowed. "I notice you wear yours low."

Lee Bartlett thought that over for a minute, then said slowly, "I'm going to put my cards on the table, face up. I'm a gunman, sure; my gun is for hire. But it's no life to get into. One of these days I'm going to hang up my plough handles and take up the other kind; reckon your father'll teach me?"

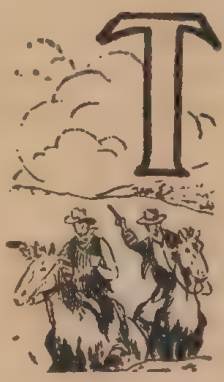
"You can be a dirt farmer if you want to." Young Henderson's eyes had turned bitter again. "But I ain't goin' to; I'm goin' to be a cattleman, a big man in this country—a bigger man than John Knight ever was."

"All right, Wes, if that's the way you want it. This'll always be a cattle country, I reckon. But be careful how you get your start. Think it over before you strap those guns on."

The boy nodded. "I'll think it over."

Lee knew that he would have to be satisfied with that.

- 3 -



THE HENDERSON layout was more pretentious than the usual settler's home. The house was adobe — originally two rooms, but a third had been added at the back. Some distance to the rear, a big frame barn loomed larger than the house; there was a hen house, a pole corral, and a vegetable garden, all neat and well-kept.

But Lee Bartlett was beginning to be doubtful that he should have accepted the boy's invitation. "Wes," he said, "maybe I'd better not go on with you. Your folks might not appreciate your bringing me home this way."

"Sure they will! What else can they do after I tell 'em you saved my life?"

"I dunno. They might not cotton to the idea of your taking up with a gunman."

"They don't need to know. You can leave your guns outside."

"You forget they knew me in Missouri."

"They don't know what happened to you since then. Come on, Lee! I tell you you'll be welcome."

Lee Bartlett had been persuaded this far by the thought that he would have to know how to locate Wes if he was going to keep an eye on the boy. He had been persuaded, too, by the thought of seeing Myra again—the very thought that now made him hang back.

She would be older, as he was older, but how would she have changed? Would the years have withered and coarsened her, as they did other pioneer women? Would her figure be wasted and stringy, and her glowing complexion sallow and weather-beaten?

Lee thought that he couldn't stand to see a Myra so transformed.

No, she hadn't been a pioneer woman for long. Before that, she had led a comfortable, sheltered life. Most likely, she would have grown plump and gossipy. But that would be just as bad...

Lee shook his head. "I reckon I'd better branch off here and head for town. Got a fellow I'm supposed to meet up with there."

"You're coming home with me!" the boy insisted. "Lee, what in tarnation's got into you, anyhow?"

Lee shrugged and gave in. "All right, Wes. Lead on."

THE PLACE was even more impressive close up. Lee Bartlett looked around him at the neat outbuildings, the wire-fenced chicken run, the flourishing garden and the corn field beyond, and mentally compared it with the usual settler's crude sod hut or dugout. This was more like a prosperous Midwest farm, he thought.

"Wes," he said, "your father made a smart move to trade for a layout like this."

"You can't get rich on forty acres," the boy said sourly.

"A man could do right well for himself. With the country filling up and a growing market for his produce, he could provide right well for his family. What more could a man want?"

"I want more," Wes Henderson replied. "A whole lot more."

A woman was standing in the doorway watching them as they approached. She stepped out onto the stoop in the sunshine, and Lee felt his breath stop for an instant. It was Myra, and she was still beautiful.

She had changed, but in neither of the ways that he had imagined. There was a full-blown maturity about her now. Where before she had been a girl to appeal to a boy of twenty, she was now a woman to stir the blood of any man.

Her eyes, unused to the bright sunshine after the gloom of the house, were squinting a little, and she didn't recognize the newcomer until he removed his hat and said, "Aren't you glad to see me, Myra?"

Then she gasped, and her hand went up to her breast. She recovered quickly, however, and came toward him with both hands outstretched. "Lee Bartlett! Where in the world did Wes find you?"

"He saved my life, Ma," the boy said. "I knew you'd want me to bring him home."

"I should say I would! Come into the house and tell me about it."

They entered a neat kitchen with muslin curtains fluttering at the window. Lee and Wes sat at a solid oak table while Myra, overriding Lee's objections, fixed them coffee.

Lee watched her move about the kitchen and saw that her figure, though it had the fullness of maturity, was still supple and graceful. When she stood near him to pour his coffee, he was keenly aware of her warmth and fragrance; and he knew that it wouldn't do for him to be a frequent visitor at the Hendersons.

It wasn't until she had poured her own coffee and sat at the end of the table, with Lee and Wes on either side of her, that she would let the boy tell his story. Then she listened with evident agitation.

"Wes," she said, "I wish you wouldn't do such things. You know your father doesn't approve of them. There's trouble enough as it is, without your making more."

"Ma, a man has to grow up sometime."

Lee and Myra exchanged smiles, a wan one on Myra's part, the usual thin one on Lee's. "I'm going to ride herd

on him from now on," Lee told her, "to see that he behaves himself."

He saw that Myra was flushing a little and wondered whether she was thinking the same thing he was: that he should have been the boy's father.

"Do you think they really would have hanged him?" she asked.

Lee shook his head. "They were only trying to throw a scare into him." But he wasn't so sure of that.

AARON WAS out in the fields, Myra said. "He's very angry with you, Wes. I think you'd better go out and see if you can still help him."

"All right, Ma." Wes was grinning as he arose and reached for his hat. "I'll leave you to talk to your old beau."

Lee watched his retreating figure with narrowed eyes. The boy was smart as a whip. "Myra, I'd give plenty to have a boy like that. You were right about it years ago. I should've settled down."

Her eyes were troubled and a little frightened, Lee thought. He wondered again whether she was thinking the same thing he was. "That's all over with now," she said. "Let's talk about what has happened to you since then."

"I'd rather not; it's not a pretty story."

He pushed back his chair and arose. "I'd better go see about my horse. It's been a long time since he's had a good rubdown."

"No, Lee—stay. I really want to hear."

Lee Bartlett was turned away from her and didn't realize that she had come toward him until he felt her hand on his arm. He faced her, and what happened then was automatic. His arms went around her, and he felt her body yielding warmly to his, and her face came up to seek his kiss.

For an instant they clung together, then her hands were pushing him away. He released her, and his arms fell stiffly to his sides. "Myra, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

She said in a shaky voice, "I think you'd better go see to your horse, after all."

Lee nodded. "That's what I thought in the first place."

He was angry as he strode toward the door, angry with himself, with Myra, with Fate for having thrown them together again. He heard Myra's voice beseeching him, "But you'll be in for supper, won't you, when the men come back?"

Lee turned back. The thin smile came to his lips.

"Wes would appreciate that. Sure, Myra—I wouldn't want to disappoint the boy."

LEE DID unsaddle Pete, but that was as far as he went. After that, he prowled around the farm yard, idly studying the cow, the chickens, the vegetable garden. Beyond the garden, the corn grew tall. He couldn't see Wes and his father working there, though once he thought he heard the sound of a voice raised in anger.

He should join them, he thought, but he didn't; he wasn't in the mood for conversation. He was behaving like a moon-struck kid in love for the first time, he told himself.

Finally he trudged to the top of the hill that rose to the north of the farm. From there he could look off across miles of level grassland to the north and west. The ruts left by Henderson's wagon wound around the base of the hill and were lost in a grove of cottonwoods along the creek bed to the north.

To the south was good rich creek-bottom land, but the land to the east of the creek was sandy brush country, not much use to either farmer or rancher. The canyons and arroyas of the breaks lay not so many miles in that direction, Lee thought.

One huge cottonwood grew on the south slope of the hill. Lee Bartlett gravitated to its shade and propped himself against the trunk to sit and roll one cigaret after another as the afternoon wore on. He looked down at the farm yard and wouldn't admit to himself that he was hoping for a glimpse of Myra, but he was disappointed when she didn't appear.

The sun was low in the west when he saw Wes and Aaron come out of the cornfield and plod across the garden toward the house. Lee threw away the latest cigaret and went down the hill to meet them. He extended his hand to Henderson. "Aaron, it's good to see you after all these years."

Aaron Henderson's handclasp was firm enough but less than cordial. "The boy told me what you did this afternoon. We're indebted to you, Bartlett."

Lee saw that the years had not been so kind to Aaron as they had to Myra. The man was on the near side of forty, but he looked much older. There were grim lines about his mouth and about his square-set jaw that told of the troubles he had been through the past few years.

At the same time, there was a look of rugged honesty about him; Lee had been prepared to dislike Aaron Henderson, but he found himself taking a liking to the man, instead.

That the liking wasn't reciprocated, though, was soon evident. Aaron was taciturn all through the evening; he responded with monosyllables to Lee's attempts at friendly conversation. The meal was eaten in virtual silence.

Lee let his eyes stray toward Myra occasionally, drinking in her beauty; and several times he caught her watching him. Their expressions must have betrayed them, Lee thought. At any rate, he became aware of Aaron's suspicious stare.

After that he tried to avoid looking at Myra. You couldn't blame the man, he thought, if he was jealous of a wife as attractive to other men as Myra was. But the knowledge that Myra was so near him was enough to draw his eyes to her time after time in spite of himself.

After supper, Aaron surprised Lee by producing a box of good cigars and by lighting one himself after he had passed the box to Lee. But the cigar didn't put Aaron into a more expansive mood. The conversation still lagged. Aaron's steady gaze, bent on Lee, was angry and suspicious; he had something on his mind.

IT WASN'T until Lee was preparing to leave, however, that Aaron broached the subject. "Bartlett, will you be in our vicinity long?"

"That depends," Lee said. "As soon as I've wound up my business, I'll be on my way."

"You have business interests here?"

Lee shrugged. "Friend asked me to help him out in a bit of trouble he's having."

Aaron's mouth tightened. He said bluntly, "You're one of the hired gunmen Knight's bringing in?"

Lee heard Myra's gasp and saw her stricken look, but this was between him and Aaron. "Seems to me," he said, "it's none of your concern who Knight hires."

"It's my concern if he tries to use hired gunmen against me."

"Knight has no intention of using hired guns against you; he told me he had rustler trouble."

"That's only an excuse. He wants to blame me for something I haven't done."

Lee's temper flared briefly, but he controlled it and tried to make his voice as mild and reasonable as he could. "Aaron, I've known John Knight for years, and he's as square a shooter as I've ever seen. If he says

he's got rustler trouble he's got rustler trouble. He's not out to make war on innocent people."

"He threatened to once."

"Knight did? In person?"

"Through his foreman, Catlin. That's the same thing. Bartlett, tell your employer that he's pushed me for the last time. I'm a peaceful man, but I've got both a rifle and a shotgun, and I'll use them if necessary to defend my property."

When Lee rode away, he had been virtually ordered, in spite of Myra's protest, to stay off of Henderson property in the future. He was shaking his head as he turned Pete out of the farm yard and into the ruts of Henderson's wagon trail.

"Pete," he said, "looks like we've landed smack in the middle of something this time. We're liable to be dodging bullets from both camps before it's done with."

"Pete," he said, "I think I'd like to get a closer look at that calf. Occurs to me it might be the same calf we forgot to turn loose in the heat of the recent fracas."

Nudging Pete off the road into the deeper shadows, he dismounted and let the reins drop. He made his way on foot from tree to tree, staying in the shadows as much as possible, until he had a vantage point that he thought would be near the route of the approaching horseman.

But after crossing the road the horseman veered off, angling toward the creek and the brush that grew thick on the banks of the nearly dry bed. Lee could see him disappear into the brush and apparently turn to the right toward the Henderson farm.

He considered following along on foot, but decided against it. There would be a plain trail along the dry creek bed for him to follow later. He wanted to have his talk with Knight before he took any decisive action.

Knight must suspect something like this, he told himself, and that was the reason Bartlett had been asked to meet Knight at the hotel in town instead of at the KT headquarters. Did Knight, after all, suspect his own foreman and former partner?

- 4 -

HE WAS WINDING his way through the cottonwoods, still in the shade of the trees but about to emerge into the bright moonlight, when Pete whickered softly.

"Easy, boy," Lee said. "I saw it, too." Coming toward the road from the direction of the KT range, a solitary cowboy was driving a calf ahead of him. The man was a lanky individual, riding slouched in his saddle with his backbone half buried in the cantle.

The calf was a brindle yearling. In the moonlight Lee Bartlett could see that its left ear was notched; but if either the horse or the calf wore a brand, it was on the other side and hidden from Lee. He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

IT WAS NEARING midnight when he reached Matosca, a one-street hamlet with two general stores, a hotel, a livery stable, half a dozen saloons, and a few scattered shacks. The only lights were the glaring saloon fronts and a dim light in the lobby of the hotel.

At the livery, Lee left Pete in charge of a sleepy tow-headed young hostler, then with his war bag slung over his shoulder made his way down the walk, only boarded here and there, toward the ramshackle two-story hotel.

There was no one in the lobby; no one came to meet him as he approached the counter. He pulled the

open ledger toward him and read the entries in the top two pages. Knight's name wasn't listed.

"Something, mister?" A dried-up wisp of a man had come out of the door to the rear of the counter. He was buttoning his shirt as he came, and yawning.

"A room," Lee said, "and information."

"The room you can have," the man said, stifling the latest yawn.

"John Knight been in?" Lee asked. He signed his name to the register, and the man behind the counter turned it to scrutinize the signature. He seemed a shade more respectful as he looked up.

"No, sir; Mister Knight hasn't been in town for quite some time now."

"Hasn't left any word for me?"

The man shook his head.

"Then I'll take the room and wait."

The clerk shoved a key toward him. "Room 212. Top of the stairs to the right."

Room 212 was a typical hotel room —just a little dingier, a little shabbier, perhaps, than most. The air inside was hot and stale; Lee went to the window and opened it wide to let in the perpetual panhandle breeze. He looked out idly. He could see the false fronts of the stores across the street, and the lighted windows of two saloons.

He was about to turn away when he saw a figure emerge from one of the saloons. The man looked up toward the hotel, and Lee Bartlett could see his face plainly enough to recognize Jed Tally. There was a scowl of indecision on Tally's face.

After hesitating for a moment, Tally angled across the street and was lost to view underneath the roof of the gallery that ran the length of the hotel. Lee left the room and headed for the stairs. Going down, he couldn't see out into the lobby. Only the bottom two steps projected out into the line of sight of anyone approaching the desk from the front door.

Lee stopped on the third step and heard the complaining voice of the clerk. Or probably the dried-up little man was the proprietor.

"Why don't you fellers come in at a decent hour, 'stead o' wakin' a man out o' his sleep. Want a room?"

"I don't want a room," the blustering voice of Tally answered. "Information's what I want."

"Information's somethin' I ain't got much of," the hotel man said.

"Greaves, don't give me none o' that! I want to know about the hombre that just now registered here."

THERE WAS a barely perceptible pause before Greaves answered. "Feller lookin' for John Knight. Didn't mention his business or where he was from."

"He signed the register, didn't he?"

Lee Bartlett descended the last two steps. "Looking for me, Tally?"

Tally turned abruptly. Some of the swagger left him as he looked from the gun slung low at Lee's side to Bartlett's hand dangling loosely in a position from which the gun could be quickly reached.

"I was lookin' for a man I thought might be here," Tally said sullenly.

"He's here. What did you want of him?"

Tally licked his lips. "Mister, if you're on the prod..."

"I'm not," Lee said, "but I got the impression that you are, Tally. If you are, start something now. Don't wait till you're behind me up some dark alley."

Tally stiffened. An ugly look came into his face, and into his shifty eyes; his hand began to creep toward his gun, but stopped.

Greaves intervened; his voice had an edge of sarcasm in it. "Tally, maybe you better look at the register before you make a move."

Tally's eyes shifted from Lee to the ledger Greaves was sliding toward him, then back again. He sidled over to the counter and, without taking his eyes off Lee for more than a fraction of a second, glanced down at the ledger. A swift change of expression came over his face.

Watching him, Lee felt his stomach turn over in disgust. He had seen that change before in the faces of would-be killers. The sight had long since ceased to hold any satisfaction for him.

"You're Lee Bartlett?" Tally demanded.

Lee nodded.

A gleam came into Tally's eyes but quickly faded. Lee had seen that gleam before, too, in the eyes of men who confronted him. The gleam said that Tally would very much like to add Lee Bartlett's name to the notches on his gun; its quick fading said that Tally would prefer to wait until another time.

Lee knew that he had backed Tally down for the present; but he added an underscoring to the mental note he had made never to turn his back on Tally.

"And now maybe you'd like to state your business with me?" he suggested.

Tally looked trapped. His eyes moved from Lee to the slightly-grinning Greaves, to the open door and the street beyond.

"Bartlett, I don't want any trouble with you," he said finally. "I was just wonderin' what you was doin' in Matosca."

"That comes under the heading of my business," Lee said.

"If you was lookin' for Knight," Tally persisted, "why come here? Why'd Knight be in town?"

"That comes under the heading of Knight's business."

Tally licked his lips. A look came over his face that was meant to be ingratiating. "If you want to put your gun to work, Catlin's the one to see. Or me. I'm the segundo at the KT now."

"When I want a job, I go to the head man. That's still Knight, isn't it?"

"Knight's sick," Tally answered. "Catlin's the head man while John's laid up."

Lee felt a chill of apprehension, not for himself but for the old friend he had come to see. "What's the matter with Knight?"

"Heart." The crafty look in Tally's face told he was aware that he had scored. "The pill wrangler says he can't 'tend to business for a long spell."

Lee thoughtfully rubbed his cheek. This put a different complexion on things. If Tally was telling the truth; and if it was true that John Knight no longer trusted Catlin, then Lee had nowhere to turn for information.

"Tell Catlin," he said, "that I'll be out to see him in a day or two."

"I'll tell him," Tally agreed. He had completely recovered his swagger as he went out the door.

BACK IN his room, Lee turned up the lamp and sat on the one chair with his feet propped up on the bed, rereading Knight's letter. The letter was a brief one.

> Old friend,
>
> Though we have lost touch with each other of late, we have been close enough in the past that I feel free to call on you for assistance in my present emergency. I believe that you are just the man I can trust to run down the source of our recent cattle losses. Catlin seems unable to do so.
>
> In late years I have been leaving most of the operation of the ranch in Catlin's hands, being occupied myself with the litigation attendant on the snarl in the Texas land laws. That the affairs of the ranch are in such poor

shape is not the fault of Catlin—he is not to blame for the recent blizzard nor the losses we have suffered in litigation—but we can ill afford to lose the cattle he says we have been losing.

Since it seems desirable that you work as much under cover as possible, will you please arrange to meet me at the hotel in Matosca at your earliest convenience?

In haste,

John Knight

Addressed to Lee in Santa Fe, the letter had reached Lee Bartlett weeks later in El Paso. He had immediately written Knight to arrange the meeting in Matosca and had taken a train to Colorado City, traveling overland from there to the eastern panhandle. He had expected to find Knight waiting for him in Matosca, or at least to find some word awaiting him.

Now, rereading the letter, he knew that he would be following a cold trail. He could no longer depend on Knight to fill in the gaps in his information—again provided that Tally had been telling the truth.

IT WAS CLEAR that Knight's trouble was in his own outfit; and Lee Bartlett was certain that Tally was somehow mixed up in it. Then there was the puncher he had seen, the one who rode with his spine half buried in the cantle.

As for Catlin, Lee wasn't so sure. He knew that Knight had trusted the old Indian fighter implicitly in the past—from the tone of his letter, Knight still did—but that didn't mean that Catlin was necessarily in the clear. Lee tried to remember what he had heard Knight say about Catlin.

Knight and Catlin, he remembered, had been partners in a previous ranching venture that had failed. Then Knight had found eastern backing and, being successful with the KT, had brought Catlin in as foreman. Could it be that there had been something about that first failure that made Catlin carry a grudge all these years?

That was possible, but somehow Lee couldn't see Catlin as one who would carry out his revenge in such an underhanded manner. If he had carried a grudge, Catlin would have killed Knight long ago, either with a gun or with his powerful bare hands.

Lee went to sleep, believing that the thing for him to do was to carry out his promise to see Catlin at the KT. Next morning, though, he wasn't so sure again. After breakfast, he strolled down the town's one street looking for a doctor's sign. He saw none.

Returning to the hotel, he saw Greaves behind the counter.

"Greaves," he asked, "how many doctors in this town?"

The clerk was still sleepy. He said, yawning, "Bartlett, you flatter our little community. Nearest sawbones is in Clarendon, sixty miles away."

"Then he wouldn't be likely to be still around if he had come here to attend Knight?"

" 'Tain't likely."

Lee mused. "I'd sure like to have a talk with that doctor."

"Stage due along any minute," Greaves suggested. "You could make it there tonight. But you'd be stuck in the Saint's Roost a day waitin' for the stage back."

"Might be worth it, if I could just be sure he's the same doctor who attended Knight..."

"Couldn't be any other," Greaves said—" 'less Tally was lyin'."

Lee nodded. "There's that," he agreed. "What do you think?"

Greaves turned and spat expertly at the cuspidor behind him. "All I know fer certain is there's somethin' goin' on out there. Knight generally comes in frequent, 'cept when he's in Austin or Fort Worth or somewheres. Now all you see o' the KT is them five killers o' Catlin's."

"Five of them?"

"Includin' Tally. Tough a lookin' crew as you ever seen."

LEE LOOKED back at Greaves speculatively. Somehow he liked the withered little man—three-day stubble, tobacco-stained cheeks, collarless neckband shirt, and all.

"Greaves," he asked, "what would you do in my place?"

The clerk squinted thoughtfully. "If I was me, or if I was you?"

"Either one," Lee said, smiling his tight smile.

"Why, if I was me, I'd high-tail it out o' here. Wouldn't want nothin' to do with that Tally; he's poison. But if I was you..." Greaves looked admiringly, and a little enviously, at the gun strapped low at Lee's side.

"You'd go out there and shoot it out with them, huh?" Lee Bartlett shook his head. "And kill Knight in the bargain—provided he does have heart trouble, that is. No, Greaves, I think the thing for me to do is to catch that stage."

AT CLARENDON, despite the lateness of the hour, Lee found the doctor in his office. The doctor, a rotund little man, peered at Bartlett over steel-rimmed glasses and declared that he had not been called to attend John Knight. The only other doctor in the region, he said, was in Moteebie, fifty miles to the northeast.

"You'd be the logical one for them to call?" Lee asked.

"If I were available. In the event that they came here and didn't find me, they might go on to Moteebie."

"But you'd know about it in that case?"

"Probably. Not necessarily."

Lee arrived back in Matosca early in the morning riding a jaded hired horse. He felt jaded himself after nearly twenty-four hours of continuous traveling; but he was spurred on by the vision he had of John Knight being held a prisoner in the big ranch house and being plundered by a ruthless gang, headed by a vengeful Catlin.

Somehow, though, the picture still didn't ring true in Lee Bartlett's mind. In the first place, it didn't fit the conception of Catlin that he had formed. In the second, there would be loyal hands, a score or more of them. Surely these could not all be cowed by Tally and his four desperadoes, even backed by Catlin and his authority.

Entering the hotel lobby, he saw Greaves behind the counter. The clerk looked surprised when he saw Lee. "Hey, I thought you was goin' to wait fer the stage!"

"The Saint's Roost was too dull for me. Anything happen while I was gone?"

"Your friend Tally come in makin' inquiries. Told 'im you skipped town fer parts unknown. He seemed real pleased."

Lee said grimly, "He won't be so pleased when I see him next." He told Greaves about the developments at Clarendon.

Greaves looked as grim as Lee did. "What you aim to do, Bartlett?"

"Ride out to the KT and see what I can find out."

The clerk looked him over critically. "Better get some sleep first. Right now you wouldn't be your best in a fracas like that."

Lee nodded. That made good sense; his limbs felt leaden. He realized, too, that he hadn't eaten since the morning of the day before.

"First, though," he said, "I could use a steak about six inches thick."

AT THE RESTAURANT across the street, he found that he wasn't quite that hungry, but he did get away with ham and eggs and two cups of coffee. Feeling somewhat revived, he re-entered the hotel lobby to see a familiar figure draped over the counter

talking to Greaves. It was Henderson. The boy turned when Lee came in, and Lee saw that he had a gun tucked in the waistband of his pants.

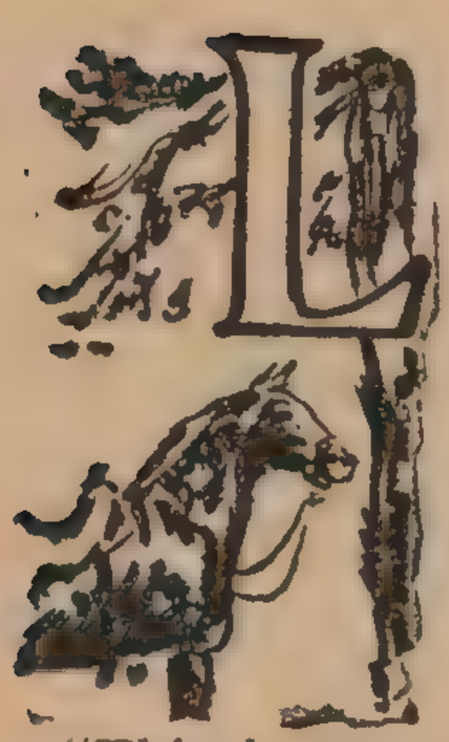
"Wes," Lee said, "what brings you into town so early? Farm work all caught up?"

"It's never caught up," Wes said sullenly. "Pa's mad as a hornet right now. But, Lee, I had to see you; Catlin paid us a visit last night."

Lee nodded. "Nice of him."

"It wasn't so nice! He gave us three days to move out or be burned out."

- 5 -



LEE looked around him at the deserted lobby and at the open door through which he had come. There didn't seem to be any possibility of eavesdroppers, but he thought that there was no use taking chances.

"This is too public, Wes," he said. "Come on up to my room and we'll talk it over." He turned to the clerk. "No offense, Greaves; come up with us, if you want to, and listen in."

Greaves shook his head. "Less I hear, the less I'll know. I'll stay here."

In room 212, Lee made the boy take the chair, while he sat on the bed with his elbows propping his chin in his hands. "Now, Wes, did Catlin come alone?"

"He had Tally and four other tough hombres with him. They was drivin' a calf they said they found in our lower creek land. I think it was the same calf I roped the other day."

"That's what I think, Wes. How'd it get on your land? Any idea?"

"It didn't stray there. It was staked out."

"That *would* look bad to Catlin," Lee conceded. "Was the calf branded?"

"Yes, but not with a KT. It was an XY Joined. It could be burned from a KT. Here, I'll show you."

Wes dug in his shirt pocket and came up with a piece of paper on which he had drawn the two brands.

"Crude," Lee said, "but good enough. Was one of the men with Catlin a lanky cuss who rode about three notches deep in the saddle?"

"That's Slim Hawkins. Him and Miles Gentry ride line for the KT from a shack about two miles up the creek."

"It was one of those two who discovered the calf?"

"They claim they trailed it down the creek and onto our land."

"I doubt that they went to all that t r o u b l e," Lee said. "Still, they might've, to fool old Catlin." He rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. "You know, Wes, I'm beginning to think that Catlin might be in the clear, after all."

Wes flared. "It was Catlin who ordered us off our land!"

"Sure, I know; but look at it this way: Tally's likely been poisoning his mind against you. And here was this KT calf staked out on your land with a brand on it that could be made up especially to be burned from a KT. What would you think if you were Catlin?"

"Well, yes," Wes acknowledged, "I can see that. But why would Tally be so set against us? We ain't done him any harm."

Lee answered indirectly. "Your father got a bargain in that farm of his, didn't he?"

"He was tickled to get it that cheap, with all the improvements."

"Ever occur to him to wonder why the owner wanted to sell?"

"He told Pa he had to go back east to see about business interests there." Suddenly Wes saw the drift of Lee's

questioning, and he asked excitedly, "Lee, do you think he was run off?"

"That's what I think."

"And you think Mister Catlin would be on our side if he knew?"

"Wes, I just don't know. Catlin doesn't strike me as a man that easily fooled. Not to mention about twenty other hands who ought to be loyal to Knight."

"I CAN EXPLAIN that part. Catlin sent most of the old hands out on the trail this summer. There's only a few of them left."

"That would make it easier for Tally," Lee said. He was thinking that it would also make it easier for Catlin, if what he was beginning to suspect should be true. "Wes, you go home and tell your folks to sit tight till I find out the truth of things."

"What're you goin' to do, Lee?"

"Ride out to the KT and see what I can see."

"I'm goin' with you!"

Lee Bartlett shook his head. "Thanks just the same, Wes."

"Lee, you can't go out there all alone."

"That's the way I like it, Wes. Besides, have you stopped to figure that your father might need your help? If they try to jump him before the deadline, wouldn't two guns be better than one?"

"Well, yes, I guess so." But the boy's face was rebellious.

Lee reached over and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Wes, you go home and tell your folks not to worry. Just leave this end of it to me."

"Wait a minute. There's something else I've got to tell you. After Catlin was gone last night, I scouted around looking for sign. I was trying to find out how that calf got on our land."

"And...?"

"I found sign! Plenty of it! Somebody's been drivin' cattle across the creek. North and south of us both."

Lee Bartlett nodded. "That's what I figured."

"But how could they get away with it? Wouldn't Knight's riders find the tracks?"

"Not if those riders were Tally's men."

"Lee, I'm goin' to find out where those tracks lead to!"

"You stay home!" Lee said sharply. "My gawd, Wes! Don't you realize those men are cold-blooded killers?"

"Aw! You're as bad my folks. All of you think I'm just a kid!"

Lee's smile almost broke out into the open this time. He tightened his grip on the boy's shoulder. "Wes, as soon as I've straightened out this mess at the KT, we'll go riding after those cattle, I promise you. But when we do, we'll have loyal men at our backs."

When the boy had gone, Lee stripped off his shirt and fumbled in his war bag for his shoulder holster and spare gun. With the gun strapped snugly under his armpit, he replaced the shirt, leaving one button conveniently open. Then with his gun belt over that, he was ready to go.

On his way through the lobby, he was hailed by Greaves. "Hey! Thought you was goin' to sleep!"

"I'll sleep later," Lee said. "Things are coming to a head."

He still felt stiff and sore, but otherwise all right. He didn't relish the ride out to the KT, but he had an impatient feeling that he would be too late if he didn't go at once.

NO MATTER what its current financial condition, the KT must have prospered once. Knight had built himself a solid house of stone, two-storied in its main part but with spreading single-storied wings. For a bachelor's home, it was quite a mansion.

The spread, with its long bunkhouse, corrals, and out-buildings, was a village

in itself; but it looked deserted in the late-morning sun, except for several horses in one of the corrals.

Seeing little chance of concealment, and feeling little need of it, Lee Bartlett rode boldly up to the front of the house. He had dismounted stiffly and was striding up to the front steps, when he heard a drawling voice off to his right.

"Well, well! If it ain't the rustler's friend!"

Jed Tally had come around the corner of the house, flanked by two of his henchmen. All three had leveled guns in their hands.

Lee faced them coolly. "Put away your guns, boys. I'm not looking for trouble."

"You just might find it," Tally said, "whether you're lookin' for it or not."

"Tally, don't be a fool!" Lee snapped. "I want to see Catlin."

"Turn around, and you'll see him."

Lee backed a step in order to shift his eyes without taking them entirely off of Tally. He saw that Catlin had come out of a side door in the left wing of the house.

Catlin's gun remained in its holster, and his arms hung loosely, but his gait was menacing and his scowl was black behind his drooping mustache and his beetling eyebrows. "Mister, I thought I told you to stay off KT land."

"I think I'll be more welcome," Lee said, "when you hear what I have to say. Let's go somewhere where we can speak in private."

"What you got to say, you can say right here," Catlin told him. "And then you can clear out. This is the last time I'm goin' to warn you."

"What I've got to say," Lee insisted, "is for your ears alone. Or Knight's. It's not for the ears of riffraff."

Out of the corners of his eyes he saw the faces of the three cutthroats, and he knew that he would have been a dead man that instant if it hadn't been for the restraining presence of Catlin. He shifted his eyes to get a better look at Jed Tally, and saw the glint in the man's eyes that told him Tally knew the reason for his visit.

"Uncle Nat," Tally said, "this hombre's in cahoots with the rustlers up on Fickle Creek. Let's string 'im up right now."

Catlin shook his head. "We got no proof, Jed. Let 'im go."

"Hell, Uncle Nat! He went home with the kid. And Greaves at the hotel said the kid came in later to see him."

CATLIN snorted. "And Greaves said he bought a trunk! You can see he didn't." Then he turned to Lee Bartlett. "Mister, you got just one minute to decide to fork that hoss and ride."

"I'm not leaving," Lee said, "until I've had a talk with you or Knight."

"You ain't havin' a talk with me, and you ain't havin' a talk with Knight. Now git!"

"I'm having a talk with you, or else I'm going in to talk with Knight. Take your choice."

Tally sneered, "You're talkin' mighty big, mister, for a man with three guns trained on him."

Lee looked back at Jed Tally calmly. "I could take one of you with me; maybe two. You'd be the first, Tally."

"There'll be no gunplay!" Catlin said sharply. "Jed, you hear that? You and the boys put away those guns; I'll handle this."

Tally looked sullen, but he obeyed, and the other two hardcases reluctantly followed suit. But Catlin had his own gun out and was leveling it at Lee.

"Mister, if there's any shootin', there'll be just one shot, and that'll be mine. Now you drop that gun belt."

Catlin was steadying his gun in the crook of his left arm and taking deliberate aim. Looking into the yawning muzzle, Lee knew that he was more afraid of Catlin's one gun than he was

of the guns of the other three. He looked back at Catlin with an outward calm he didn't feel.

"Catlin, tell me the truth about Knight. I'll believe *you*."

If the shot struck home to Tally, Lee didn't notice. He was watching Catlin intently, and it seemed to him that the foreman's manner was just a little bit less certain. If so, however, Catlin's answer didn't show it. "After you've dropped that gunbelt, mister."

"Before," Lee insisted. "Is it true that he had a heart attack?"

Catlin hesitated for a bare fraction of a second. "It is, if you got to know. Doc says he ain't to be disturbed, and, by gawd, he ain't goin' to be."

Lee nodded. He had learned two things. The byplay between uncle and nephew had told him how Catlin could be so blind to Tally; this answer, obviously sincere, told him that, no matter what the truth of the scrambled situation, old Catlin was still loyal to his employer. Yet Lee was not entirely satisfied.

"The doctor at Clarendon said he hadn't been called. You didn't go all the way to Moteebie?"

"There's other doctors, mister."

"Not around here, Catlin."

The foreman's hesitation was just a shade longer this time. "If you must know, Knight's got a visitor. Man from back East. Happens to be a sawbones. That make you any happier?"

LEE ALLOWED his eyes to lift toward the second story of the house. A fluttering there had bothered him from the first. He saw a partially opened window with a shade drawn to darken it. That would be Knight's room, he thought.

The patient might already have been disturbed by the sound of voices. A fusilade of shots, or even a single shot, directly below his window, might easily prove fatal to him.

Lee studied Catlin thoughtfully. He was sure now that the foreman would go to any lengths to avoid even the risk of that single shot; but he was equally sure that he himself could not afford the risk of carrying out his intention of bluffing his way into the house.

He shrugged. "All right, Catlin, you win." He began to unbuckle his gunbelt.

Catlin watched with evident satisfaction. "Now," he said, "you fork that hoss and high-tail it out o' here."

There must be some way, Lee thought, to get through that stubbornly tough exterior. Bluffing hadn't worked; perhaps reasoning would.

"Catlin," he said, "it's important that I talk to you alone. Let's go somewhere and thrash this out."

He had said the wrong thing, he saw. Catlin's neck took on the color of a mottled beet.

"All right, mister, you asked for it. Git goin'."

Catlin Willoughby gestured with his gun barrel toward the path that led past the corner of the house. Lee Bartlett shrugged and complied. He had to pass close to Tally and his hardcases, who moved aside barely enough for him to brush past them. All three were leering triumphantly.

They fell in behind, and Lee felt a cold chill at the thought of having those three vicious guns at his back. Again he was grateful for the deterring presence of Willoughby.

Catlin prodded him on past the bunkhouse toward the nearer corral. Lounging in the bunkhouse door, a lean, wiry man with soot-black eyes and tinges of gray at his temples and in his clipped mustache stared impassively. As the procession passed, he pushed himself to his feet as if to follow. He wore no gun, Lee noticed.

They went on past the first corral and on behind the big frame barn. There, apparently, Catlin was satisfied

that he was far enough away from the house.

"All right, mister, you can turn around now."

Lee turned to see that Catlin was unbuckling his own gun belt, laying it carefully aside, advancing with huge biceps bulging beneath his rolled-up shirt sleeves.

"This," Catlin said, "is goin' to be a pleasure."

-6-

CATLIN was coming forward slowly, one threatening step at a time, showing his yellow teeth as if in enjoyment of the pleasure he anticipated. He was hatless, and a breeze was ruffling his hair, increasing its shagginess. He reminded Lee Bartlett of an untamed range bull pawing at the dirt with angry hooves.

And Catlin Willoughby was as dangerous as that bull would be. Once within range of those massive arms and ham-like hands, Lee would have no chance. He made one last attempt to break through the foreman's stubborn obsession.

"Catlin," he said, "you're making a mistake."

"*You* made the mistake when you come here."

"I came at Knight's invitation."

Catlin shook a ponderous head. "You can't put that over, mister! You come to bluff your way in, thinkin' to shy us off from your nester friends."

Tally had planted that idea well, apparently. Nothing Lee could say would shake the old foreman out of it.

Catlin took another step, but a short one. He didn't seem to be in any hurry. Lee's mind went fleetingly to the gun in his shoulder holster, but he rejected it.

Nothing short of a bullet in his heart would stop Catlin now. Lee didn't want to be the man to plant that bullet. Here was a man, he told himself, worth all seven of the other men whom he had killed in self defense.

"For gawd's sake, Catlin," he said. "I don't want to have to kill you!"

"You ain't goin' to kill me, mister." Catlin took another slow step forward.

The breeze tore at Lee's shirt, whistling inside and opening an inviting gap where the button was not fastened. The thought occurred to him that it was his life or Catlin's, that he would be justified in pulling the gun and shooting. Still he hesitated.

He would be shooting down an unarmed man, whether in justified self-defense or not. And further, he would be shooting down a man whom he would rather call his friend than his enemy.

Then the realization struck him that he had half-turned his back to Tally in arguing with Catlin. Another realization struck him that must have been instinct. He couldn't have known that Tally had seen what lay beneath the gaping shirt front and was quick to use it as an excuse.

He whirled around. He was just in time to see Tally's hand steal toward his holster. Seeing that he was discovered, Tally clawed for his gun as Lee's hand streaked beneath the gaping shirt front. The shots came simultaneously.

Lee felt a searing impact in his left side that spun him half around. He staggered but recovered himself and stood swaying groggily. Then he turned his head and saw the dazed, incredulous look in Tally's face that he had seen before in the faces of mortally wounded men.

Tally's gun had dropped from his limp hand. Tally was slumping slowly to the ground. His two henchman stood

frozen in an unbelief as strong as Tally's.

Lee challenged them with lips that were stiff and nerveless. "Anybody else want to make a move?"

THE WORDS were little more than a croak; they must have betrayed his weakness; but they were enough. The two killers stood motionless, refusing to rise to the challenge. Through the roaring in his ears, Lee heard Catlin's voice from somewhere far off to his left.

"By gawd, I'll move—gun or no gun! You killed my sister's boy!"

Lee could have killed Catlin then, and probably no one would ever have blamed him. Except Lee Bartlett himself. He couldn't bring himself to it.

Instead, he dropped his gun to the ground. He could feel the hot blood gushing from the wound in his side and trickling in a flood down his chest, soaking his shirt. It was with difficulty that he could stay erect, but he forced himself to say as calmly as he could, "All right, Catlin. It's your move."

His action stopped Catlin as no bullet, except a fatal one, could have done. Catlin stood where he was in indecision. The puncher with the dark eyes and the clipped mustache stepped out from where he had been lounging against the barn.

"Hold on, Nat! Tally reached first; he was goin' to drill this feller in the back."

Catlin nodded slowly. "All right, Bart. Take him to the Doc."

But if the old foreman's toughness was shattered, he didn't show it as he turned a stern face toward the two Tally henchmen.

"Bart'll take care of 'im. You two stay here; I want to have some words with you."

Bart came to Lee's side and put an arm under his to support him, but Lee pulled away. "Bart, can you lay your hands on a gun?"

Bart chuckled. "Same place you carried yours, partner!"

"Then draw it, man. Catlin's facing two cold-blooded killers with nothing but his bare hands!"

He fainted dead away then. He didn't see what happened next.

He was dimly aware of voices; then after awhile he was conscious of being lifted and carried into the house. He was aware of the pain when the doctor probed for the bullet and of being handled as they undressed him and put him to bed. The next thing he knew he was lying in a lamplighted room, with his side and shoulder tightly bandaged, and the doctor was looking down at him quizzically.

The doctor was a big man, almost as big as Catlin. The lamplight threw his face into relief, accentuating the bold nose, the high forehead, the heavy white hair, the full beard.

"You're a lucky cuss!" the doctor said. "A little lower, and you would have had a nasty wound from which you might not have recovered. As it is, you'll be riding again within a week—provided no complications set in."

"A week's a hell of a long time," Lee observed.

"Now, dammit, man!" the doctor said. "None of that! It's bad enough having John Knight on my hands."

"How is John?" Lee asked.

"Better. But not as well as he thinks he is."

"How'd Catlin come out with his two hardcases?"

"He sent them packing. I understand he gave them twenty-four hours to leave the country."

Lee frowned. "That's too long. Catlin around?"

He was thinking that the two would join the other two at the line shack, and then the four, well-heeled, would ride no telling where. Very likely they would ride east toward the breaks, but the Henderson farm would be directly

in their path. And they were vengeful men...

"Nat'll be in to see you in the morning," the doctor was saying. "You lie still and give that hole in your side a chance to heal."

"I've got to see him now," Lee said. "Do you send him in to me, or do I get out of here and go hunting for him?"

The doctor looked down, pulling at his beard. "By gawd, I believe you mean it!"

"I mean it."

"Then," the doctor said, "if you'll promise not to excite yourself, I'll send him in to you."

LEE BARTLETT was beginning to think that the doctor had broken his promise, when the foreman came in looking as bristly as ever.

"Dammit, mister! I'm still roddin' this spread! I told Bart to help you in the house."

"And I told him to pull his gun," Lee said. "I figured you needed help."

Catlin snorted. "Any time I can't handle ten like that I'll hang up my saddle! What can I do for you, mister?"

"Name's Lee," Lee said— "Lee Bartlett."

Catlin stared. "Knight's old compadre?"

Lee nodded, and Catlin said, "Bartlett, I'm damn' glad to have you around. We're goin' to be short-handed as hell till the boys get back from the trail."

"How many men can you muster?"

"Ten, but they're scattered to hell and gone. We been line-ridin' instead o' fencin' till this lease squabble is settled."

"How long would it take you to round 'em up?"

"Bart's out roundin' 'em up now. Tomorrow we ride."

Tomorrow, Lee was thinking, might be too late. But he didn't say it. "Good! I was afraid you were going to let them get away with it."

"Nobody's gettin' away with nothin'," Catlin said grimly. "And, Bartlett, I hate to say this, but that goes for your nester friends, too. We're runnin' 'em out."

Lee looked back at Catlin levelly—as levelly, that is, as a man could who was lying in bed facing a standing man.

"Catlin, the day you try that, you and I tangle again. And this time I use my gun."

"You ain't drawin' a gun on nobody for a spell." In spite of his new-found friendship for Lee, Catlin seemed to derive a grim sort of satisfaction from the thought. "I ain't forgettin' you spared my life when you could've drilled me. And I ain't forgettin' you're an old compadre of John's. But that don't change things none. Them nesters've got to go."

"Catlin," Lee said, "you're a stubborn damn' fool. When did your rustling start?"

Catlin hesitated. "It was before Jed come here, if that's what you're thinkin'."

"And that was before the Hendersons moved out to Fickle Creek?"

"But not before they started that store in town. And not before they tried to gouge out a chunk o' our best grazin' land. When we put a stop to that, they moved out to Fickle Creek and threw in with the rustlers—if they wasn't in with 'em all the time. It's plain enough."

Yes, Lee thought, it was plain enough. Catlin didn't really believe that the Hendersons were rustlers; he was only rationalizing his hatred of them for the attempted land grab.

"If that's so," he argued, "why'd Tally want to betray them to you?"

Catlin grunted. "That boy'd double-cross his own mother." The thought seemed to throw him into a pensive mood; his rugged face was almost soft

in the lamplight. "Sure, Bartlett, I was a damn' fool. But that boy's mother was my favorite sister. I believed 'im when he said he was goin' to straighten out."

LEE SAID sympathetically, "Anybody could be fooled that way. But that doesn't change the fact that the Hendersons didn't have anything to do with your rustling."

"They was crooked from the start. They tried to do John Knight out o' land that was rightfully his."

"It was legal, wasn't it? Henderson was within his rights?"

"It was legal, but it wasn't right. Me and John fought the Injuns for this land. When the lease law was passed, John bid it in fair and square at four cents an acre. He had to lease his own land!"

"In that case, what's all the lawing about?"

"The Land Board tried to rig us. Upped the ante to eight cents, and John wouldn't pay. So the board put the land up for sale, and Henderson grabbed all the law'd allow 'im to—a section o' watered land and seven o' dry. Damn' near split the KT range in two. Can you blame us for fightin'?"

"Can't say that I do," Lee conceded. "But, hell, man! You don't want the land they're on now, do you?"

Willoughby shook his head. "Let 'em have it. John's even willin' to buy all the corn they can raise. But if they'd throw in with rustlers once, they'd do it again. They got to go."

Catlin's face was like granite. Lee's face, in turn, hardened. "Catlin, I meant what I said. If any harm comes to the Hendersons, you'll have to settle with me."

"No harm'll come to 'em if they're sensible." The foreman's face was grimly troubled as he turned away.

Lee waited until Catlin had been gone some minutes, listening for sounds of other activity around the house. He heard none. It was still early evening, he judged, but the house was quiet.

He threw off the sheet that covered him and squirmed around, lifting himself by his good arm until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. That took more effort than he had anticipated. The bandaged shoulder pained him at every move, and he had to fight off dizziness.

He saw his pants hanging by the belt on a peg against the far wall. His boots were under the bed. Pulling them toward him with a foot, he saw that his socks were inside. No sign of shirt or undershirt. He shrugged, then winced at the reminder from his bandaged shoulder. He would go out stripped to the waist if necessary.

The first time he tried to stand up, he had to sit down abruptly again, but the second time he stayed on his feet and seemed to gain strength as he made his way across the room. Returning with the pants, he felt almost himself again, except for the ache in his left shoulder.

He managed with some difficulty to pull on the pants and boots, using his left hand as little as possible. Then he raised the shade and stood looking down through the open window at the moonlit ranch yard. His room was an upstairs one. He judged from the position of the moon that it was on the south side.

He tried to recall what little he knew of the house. He would probably have to pass Knight's room, and possibly the doctor's, on his way to the stairs. He could only hope that their doors would be closed or that they would be asleep.

HE HAD BLOWN out the light and was preparing to leave the room, when he heard footsteps approaching the door. They were stealthy footsteps

and close; whoever it was must be making a special effort to be quiet.

For an instant he considered diving back under the sheet and pretending to be asleep; then, as the doorknob began to turn, he knew that it was too late for that. He stood in the middle of the floor and waited, with his hand on his gun.

The door opened and a head looked in. It was the doctor. He allowed an explosive oath to escape him when he saw Lee Bartlett standing silhouetted against the window, but entered the room and carefully closed the door behind him before he spoke.

"Man, what in heaven's name do you think you're doing? Get back in bed!"

Lee shook his head. "Doctor, I'm riding tonight."

"If you do," the doctor said testily, "I won't be responsible for the consequences."

"I'm responsible."

"You're about as responsible as John Knight is! Isn't one such patient enough?"

"Doctor, I'm sorry, but I've got to ride tonight. It's urgent."

"Do you realize that if that wound breaks open again you may bleed to death before help comes?"

Lee nodded. "That's the chance I'll have to take."

The doctor stared at him. "And *you* called *Catlin* a stubborn damn' fool!" He pulled at his beard for a moment, then jerked his head abruptly. "At least I can get you a shirt to wear, and I think your gunbelt is hanging on the hall tree. You stay here."

At the door, the doctor paused with his hand on the knob. "I almost hope you do bleed to death! At least that would be one irresponsible patient I'd be rid of!"

When the doctor returned with the promised shirt and gun belt, he asked, "How do you think you're going to manage to saddle a horse and mount it—much less stay on it?"

"I'll manage," Lee said, remembering to shrug only his good shoulder.

Reaching the corral, he saw with satisfaction that his saddle was hanging on the top rail, and his saddle gun with it. He had softly whistled Pete to him and was struggling with the heavy saddle, when he heard Catlin's voice from the direction of the gate. "Goin' some place, Bartlett?"

Lee turned, dropping the saddle in the process. "I'm riding, Catlin. Got the doctor's permission."

Then he saw that the doctor had come up behind Catlin. "You have nothing of the kind!" the doctor snapped. "You go get back in bed before you kill yourself!"

"Doctor," Lee said reproachfully, "I thought you were a friend of mine!" He turned back to pick up the saddle.

"Hold on, Bartlett!" Catlin said. "You'll ride when the doc says you can, and not before." He spat and turned to the doctor inquiring, "How long you say that'll be, doc?"

"About a week," the doctor said. "Bartlett, this is for your own good, believe me."

"Can't wait that long," Lee said.

As he bent to the saddle again, he heard a whispered colloquy going on behind him. Then Catlin said, "If you're bent on goin', I reckon there ain't no stoppin' you. In that case, I'll ride along."

Lee straightened. "You won't be welcome where I'm going."

"I'll take my chances. Stand aside, Bartlett, and let me saddle that hoss for you."

Knowing that there was no use protesting, Lee stood aside and watched while Catlin deftly saddled Pete and cut himself a buckskin out of the bunch of horses in the corral.

LEE COULD feel the jolt of it in his left shoulder every time Pete took a stride. Before long, his whole left side was throbbing with excruciating pain. But he stuck grimly in the saddle. He couldn't tell whether the wound had reopened, and he was beginning to hope that the doctor had bound him up tightly enough to hold.

He and Catlin rode in silence most of the way. Finally, when they topped the rise that looked down on the Henderson homestead, Catlin pulled up. Lee followed his example and sat looking down at the prosperous farm that spread before him.

The kitchen was lighted, he noticed. That surprised him. He would have thought that the Hendersons, being farmers, would have retired long since.

"I'm leavin' you here," Catlin said. "You give the nesters their warnin' from me. I want 'em packed and ready to move by tomorrow night."

"They're not moving," Lee said flatly. "Catlin, I tell you you're barking up the wrong tree."

"What tree I bark up is my affair. You just give 'em that warnin'."

"Catlin, if you come riding this way tomorrow night, somebody's going to get hurt."

"Nobody'll get hurt that acts sensible about it. When I come this way again, I'll have ten men at my back."

Lee was reluctant to leave it that way. They were about to part enemies, and the thought saddened him.

"Catlin, why don't you ride in with me and talk it over?"

"There's nothin' to talk over. I've given 'em fair warnin' and that's final."

Lee watched him go with regret. Catlin was not backtracking toward the KT headquarters but was heading north toward where Lee remembered the line shack lay. Lee was of half a mind to ride after him. If Catlin were to run into the four desperadoes at the line shack, he might need help.

But then Lee Bartlett shrugged his one good shoulder and spurred Pete on toward the homestead. His first concern, after all, was for the safety of the Hendersons.

It occurred to him that, though he had declared to Catlin that the Hendersons would stand pat, the final decision would be Aaron's and Myra's. He would have to abide by what they decided. But he thought that they would decide to fight, and in that event, they would need all the help they could get.

Thinking of Myra, he felt a cold fear stab at his heart. She would have to be moved to a place of safety. And the boy, too, if possible. But the thin smile came to Lee's lips as he thought of how far he would probably get if he tried to persuade Wes to move to a place of safety.

Unless it was under the pretext of caring for his mother... That might work, Lee thought...

THINKING THUS, he had ridden into the farm yard. He reined up and dismounted. It was only then that he saw the figure on the stoop, outlined sharply in the light that streamed from the doorway. The figure was Aaron. He had a rifle in his hand.

"Stay where you are, Bartlett!" Henderson called out. "This is my land, and you're trespassing."

"Aaron, I come as a friend," Lee said. "Put away your gun."

"You came for the KT." Henderson's voice was harsh.

"I did," Lee acknowledged, "but still as a friend."

"You had someone with you. He rode off behind the hill."

If Aaron had seen that, he probably thought he was surrounded.

"That was Catlin. He rode back to the KT. I give you my word that I'm alone."

"The word of a hired gunman!"

Lee felt his temper flare for an instant, but controlled it. "The word of a friend. Believe me, Aaron, I came to help you."

He saw that Myra had come out on the stoop and had but a hand on Aaron's arm. "Please believe him!" she pleaded. "He may have word of Wes."

Lee felt again that cold stabbing at his heart. Had something happened to the boy? Oblivious to the threat of Aaron's rifle, he strode up to the stoop.

Aaron lowered the gun. "Very well, Bartlett," he said, but not too graciously. "Come in."

When they had entered the house, Myra sank wearily into a chair by the table. She was very tired, Lee noticed. She looked much older. There were lines in her face that hadn't been there when he had seen her before.

Lee himself was feeling old all of a sudden. The wounded shoulder was aching intolerably—it had never stopped aching—and, weakened by his recent loss of blood, he was exhausted by the short ride from the KT spread. He was glad to follow Myra's example and sink into a chair at the end of the table.

"What's this about the boy," he asked. "Isn't he here?"

"He left home early this morning and hasn't been back." Aaron had remained standing and was facing Lee with the belligerence still in his voice and attitude. "That comes of associating with cowboys and other ruffians."

"Wes is a good boy, Aaron," Myra said. "Something must have happened to him. Lee, you haven't seen him?"

"He came to see me in town," Lee acknowledged, "But I told him to come home again. He should have been here before noon."

"He isn't here," Aaron said. "Bartlett, you know something you're holding back."

THAT WAS true, Lee acknowledged to himself. He did know something; or, at least, he suspected something. Wes was out there somewhere in the brush country now, perhaps lost, perhaps still blundering along on the trail of the rustled cattle.

Lee pushed back his chair. "I think you're right, Myra; something has happened to the boy." He saw the quick look of alarm in her face, and added hastily, "But nothing bad. He's only gone off on a fool errand he had in mind. I thought I had talked him out of it."

"What errand?' Aaron demanded.

"Nothing to be alarmed about. I can find him for you easily." Lee was not so sure of that as he hoped he sounded.

Instead of rising, he stayed where he was and said, "But first there's something I've got to tell you." He hesitated, scarcely knowing how to begin. He could feel Aaron Henderson's eyes on him, still angry and suspicious, and he knew that what he had to say would not sit well with Aaron.

"You must understand," he said, "that I came here solely as a friend. If I have an unpleasant message to deliver, it is not of my own choosing."

He told them of Catlin's ultimatum. "Aaron, I couldn't tell him whether you'd fight or not. That's your decision, of course..."

"We'll fight," Henderson said.

"Then I'll fight on your side, Aaron, if you'll have me."

He heard a gasp from Myra, of relief and happiness, and saw for an instant the same relief cross Aaron's face. Then Henderson's face clouded over again with doubt and suspicion.

"Bartlett, I don't know whether we can trust you or not. We might be harboring an enemy in our midst."

"Aaron!" Myra cried. "What a thing to say! Of course we can trust Lee!"

Lee Bartlett suppressed his anger; the man was Myra's husband and his doubts were understandable.

"You can trust me, Aaron," he said mildly. "You're in the right, and I've never used my gun except in a cause that I thought was right."

Seeing that Henderson still was not convinced, he added, "Sit down, Aaron, and let's have a council of war. I'm

here to help you. You can believe that."

"Yes, Aaron," Myra said. "Don't be stubborn. We need Lee's help; we need it badly."

AARON HENDERSON'S face was still dark with suspicion, but he leaned his gun against the wall and came over and took a chair by the table. Lee told the two of the events of the day, beginning with Wes's visit to him at the hotel.

He told them of the killing of Tally, but dismissed his own wound as a mere scratch. He had hoped that Myra, at least, would miss the full significance of what he told them; but when he had finished, he could see that she had grasped it.

"Then that means"—her voice was low and strained—"that Wes is out there in danger of being found by those desperate men."

"I'll find him first," Lee said. "Don't worry, Myra."

He pushed back his chair again and rose to his feet. The movement made him giddy for a moment, and he stood until he felt steadier, hoping that the others hadn't noticed.

Henderson had arisen, too, and was reaching for his gun. "I'm going with you, Bartlett."

"No, Aaron!" Lucy cried sharply. She rose swiftly and went to Aaron and clung to his arm. "I couldn't bear to think that both of you are out there —you and Wes—without my knowing..."

She had half turned Aaron, so that she was looking at Lee over his shoulder. Her eyes were pleading with Lee to understand. Lee Bartlett nodded slowly to show that he did understand.

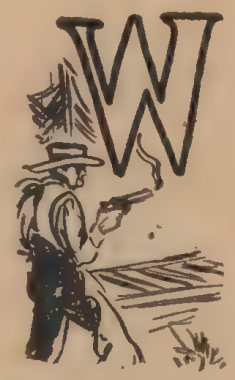
What her eyes were telling him was that her love for him had been a flaming passion that had burned itself out over the intervening years, that her coming into his arms the other day had been but a brief flaring up of the half-dead embers. They were saying that her abiding love was for this man with whom she had lived for fifteen years.

Lee slowly nodded again. That was as it should be, he tried to tell himself, but he couldn't help feeling a stab of bitter disappointment. "Aaron, you can't leave Myra here alone with those four outlaws on the loose."

Henderson said reluctantly, "I suppose you're right..."

"I'm right," Lee said. "You stay here, Aaron, and keep those guns handy."

- 7 -



WHEN HE headed out of the farm yard, Lee Bartlett was beginning to be doubtful that he could carry out his promise to Myra. He was fighting off spells of dizziness and nausea, so bad at times that it was all he could do to stay erect in the saddle.

But he did stay doggedly in the saddle, turning to the right along the wagon ruts. In the space between the ruts he could see the tracks of two horses leading off toward town. One set, he knew, he had made himself a couple of days before. The other, the fresher tracks, must have been made by Wes on his way to town that morning.

Somewhere ahead, he should strike the tracks Wes Henderson had made on the return trip, and they should plainly show where the boy had turned off the road. Unless, of course, the boy had cut off across country from the main, well-traveled road; then his trail might be more difficult to pick up.

Here and there, Lee could see the tracks of cattle crossing the road from both directions. The KT line riders evidently had found it more convenient to allow the cattle to drift to Fickle

Creek, when there was water there, than to drive them back toward their own waterings.

Then he noticed that whenever the tracks indicated the cattle had been driven, the tracks always led off toward the creek. It was obvious what was becoming of the KT cattle.

Lee mentally cursed old Catlin's blindness. Surely he rode out this way occasionally to check up on things. But, no, he had probably left that to Jed Tally and his line riders. The old foreman had trusted his nephew implicitly; and Tally and his gang, given a free rein, had become bolder as time went on.

Presently he came to where the ruts curved westward to join the main road half a mile away. Still there had been no sign of Wes's returning.

"Pete," Lee mused, "should we keep to the road or head toward the creek hoping to cut his trail in that direction?"

He noticed something that he had been too preoccupied to notice when he had come this way before. Up ahead, a well-beaten trace crossed the ruts. To the left it formed a rough triangle with the ruts and the main road; Lee guessed that in that direction it led to the line shack somewhere west of the road.

To the right, the trace roughly paralleled the ruts for a short distance, then angled off toward the brush of the creek bed. Obviously this was a well-traveled route between the main base at the line camp and the hideout somewhere east of the creek. Again Lee was struck by the boldness of Tally and his gang.

HE RODE to where the trace crossed the ruts, confident that there he would pick up Wes's trail. But on the other side, there were still no tracks indicating Wes Henderson's return. Lee pulled up, and rubbed his cheek thoughtfully.

"Pete, I think I know what happened. Wes knew about this trace and wanted to investigate. But to save time he cut across from the main road and picked up the trace somewhere toward the creek. If we ride that way, we'll probably cut his sign."

He had not gone more than a few yards along the trace when he saw fresh tracks to his right, of a horse traveling in the opposite direction. A short distance further on, he saw more tracks, this time to the left of the trace. As he rode on, he saw more tracks, first to one side, then the other.

"Pete," he said, "the horse that made those tracks was about as steady on his feet as a ranch hand after a Saturday night in town."

He rode on. He was nearing the creek when he saw the tracks he was looking for. They came from the direction of the main road, curved east into the trace, and were lost.

This was what Lee had expected to see, but he was puzzled. Close together in the dirt, he could see two sets of prints, one headed east, the other west. They looked the same to him.

He dismounted, stiffly and painfully, and found that he was not so steady on his own feet. The giddiness was so sharp that he had to grab the saddle for a moment, to regain his balance, before he felt capable of stooping to examine the prints more closely.

When he had done so, his judgment was confirmed. The two sets of prints had been made by the same horse, once going east, again going west. The westbound prints were the fresher, made within the hour.

Plainly Wes Henderson had explored the trace eastward, then had returned riding a jaded horse. That meant that he had ridden pretty far, if he had been riding since morning.

Obviously, though, he hadn't turned toward home at the wagon road, or Lee would have met him coming back. That meant that he had ridden on down the trace (thinking that it led

to the KT headquarters?) and had wound up at the line shack.

What had he encountered there? Catlin? The four rustlers? Or had Wes ridden spang into the middle of a blazing gun battle between the two factions?

Partly because of his impatience, partly because of weakness, Lee Bartlett failed in his first attempt to remount. He stood panting for a moment before he tried again. Then by clinging desperately to the saddlehorn, he managed to pull himself up into the saddle.

"Pete," he said, when he had regained his breath, "from now on, we cut sign from the saddle or not at all."

But there proved to be no necessity of dismounting again. The trail ran plain enough along the trace until he had reached the main road. There he could see the zigzag tracks continue on the other side.

The trace ran straight as an arrow now toward where, in the distance, he could see a corral with the black dots of horses in it. He couldn't see the shack. That would be a dugout, he supposed, built into the south side of the low rise of ground beyond the corral.

The north side, then, would be the blind side. That would be the direction from which to approach the line shack. Lee turned Pete northward along the road until he had gone far enough to put the shack behind him. Then he cut off to the left, across the plain.

By now his whole left side was a searing pain. He began to suspect that his wound had been reopened by his struggle to regain the saddle. He would have to find Wes quickly or not at all.

THE SHACK was a sod-roofed adobe, larger than he had expected. He had failed to see it because at a distance it blended perfectly with the landscape. As he rode down the slope toward it, he could see no one around, but he recognized two of the six horses in the corral. One was Wes's sorrel, the other the buckskin Catlin had been riding.

Catlin was there, then, and Wes, but who were the others—rustlers or loyal KT men? If Lee had been more his normal self, he might have dismounted and approached more cautiously; as it was, both his weariness and his impatience impelled him to ride in and get it over with quickly.

He rounded the shack and pulled up before the door. His voice, as he called out, sounded weak to him, but it got results. Catlin came out, followed by another man and then another, until there were four men ranged behind him.

One was Slim Hawkins, the lanky puncher who rode three notches deep in the saddle, and who had driven the maverick across the road. Two had been with Tally that afternoon. The fourth Lee didn't recognize, but he was as tough and evil-looking as the others.

These were the rustlers, but Catlin looked perfectly at ease with them.

"Well, by gawd!" Catlin said. "Look who dropped in on us, boys! Light down, Bartlett, and rest a spell."

Lee looked warily from Catlin to the four hardcases." Where's the boy?" he demanded.

"Inside," Catlin answered, "snug as a bug. Git down, I say!"

This was not an invitation but a command. Lee eased himself painfully from the saddle. He lurched a little as he gained the ground, but he hoped that it hadn't been noticed.

When the mists had cleared from his eyes, he saw that he was looking into the muzzles of five drawn guns.

Catlin dropped all pretense of cordiality. "You'd be a heap more comfortable, Bartlett, if you dropped that gun belt."

LOOKING at the five guns trained on him, Lee Bartlett knew that he

had no other choice. He began to unbuckle his gun belt.

"What is this, Catlin?" he asked. "I didn't come here on the prod. I'm only looking for the boy."

"You found him. I said he was inside, didn't I?"

"Is he all right?" Lee persisted.

Catlin shrugged. "He's all right for a spell. After that—well, I reckon it's up to the boys what they do with 'im."

That was plain enough, but Lee was still reluctant to believe it. "Catlin, I hate to admit that I could be so wrong in my judgment of a man."

"Who you misjudged now, Bartlett?"

"You," Lee said. "I never would have taken you for a cow thief. Least of all that you would steal from John Knight."

"And now you changed your mind about me?"

Lee shrugged his good shoulder. "What else can I do? What would you think?"

"Same thing you do, I reckon."

But the old foreman's eyes had lost some of their hardness; they were flickering thoughtfully as he pulled at the right handlebar of his mustache. "Bartlett, I don't rightly know why I should explain to you. The plain truth is, Knight's on the rocks. Them sharks back east has been bleedin' him white, pushin' him to the wall. Now they aim to take over the whole shebang."

"And you're helping him by stealing his cattle."

"Not his, Bartlett; theirs. When I caught on to what Jed was doin', I threw in with him. I aim to get a stake out of it—for me and John. That satisfy you?"

Lee nodded. "It makes more sense that way." He could more readily believe that Catlin would steal *for* Knight than *from* him. "But Knight'll never consent to it."

"He won't know. Nobody's goin' to tell him how I got the stake."

The lanky puncher, Slim Hawkins, spoke up impatiently.

"Uncle Nat," —he heavily stressed the name— "cut the palaverin' and let's get out o' here. It ain't important what this gunslick thinks of you."

Catlin turned and regarded Slim with the same thoughtful eyes. "Damn' queer, but it's important to me."

"It won't be long," Slim said. "After tonight he ain't thinkin' nothin' of nobody."

"Maybe he ain't," Catlin said, "maybe he is." He turned back to Lee. "Bartlett, if I let you go free, will you give me your parole to clear out and not come back?"

Lee shook his head. "Not without the boy."

"What if I let the boy go on the same parole?"

"He'll never consent to desert his folks; I know him better than that."

"He'll consent," Catlin said, "if it's either that or his neck."

Lee was tempted. It might be that he could persuade the boy if he put it up to him that it would be better to stay alive and be able to help his folks later...

So far as he himself was concerned, Lee knew that it didn't matter. He was too far gone. He was positive now that his wound had broken open again. He would never survive a ride such as he would have to undergo if he were to take Catlin up on his proposition.

LEE KNEW that he was swaying slightly as he stood there. Hazily, he heard Slim speak up again.

"Uh uh, Uncle Nat! The boy ain't goin' free. He knows too much."

"What he knows, others can find out."

"He stumbled on it accidental. Others might not be so lucky. Our trail ain't so plain once it reaches the breaks."

"Then we're safe enough. I made Bartlett a proposition, and I aim to keep my end of it."

"There ain't no proposition, Uncle Nat. Bartlett and the boy go with us."

"Slim, I'm runnin' this!"

"Uncle Nat," Slim said softly, "you don't understand."

He and the others had followed Catlin's example and had holstered their guns once Lee had dropped his. Now Slim stood spread-legged with his hand close to his gun butt.

"You never was runnin' this show, Uncle Nat; Jed was. Now that he's gone, I am."

"By gawd, Slim!" Catlin took a step toward the lanky puncher.

"Don't try it, Uncle Nat!"

Slim's gun was in his hand. The man was fast, Lee told himself. He hadn't seen the movement of Slim's hand.

"And while we're on the subject, Uncle Nat: You ain't hoggin' the deal like you thought you was. Jed figured to split five ways; now I reckon it'll be four."

Catlin said thickly, "Slim, you can't get away with that!"

"Why not, Uncle Nat? We know where the cattle is. You don't."

"I'll track you down, Slim. And then, by gawd..."

"You won't track nobody down, Uncle Nat. You're goin' with us till we're through with you."

"Slim," Catlin repeated, "you can't get away with that. The boys..."

"The boys won't know what to do without you to tell 'em. By the time they get through millin' around, we'll be in Indian Territory. Then we'll turn you loose, Uncle Nat—afoot."

Slim was lying, Lee knew; he had no intention of turning anyone loose alive. Catlin knew it, too. "By gawd, Slim, we'll settle this right now!"

Then the old warhorse was charging forward, empty handed, straight into Slim's leveled gun.

THAT WAS the opening Lee needed. He dropped to the ground and rolled, grabbing at his gun belt. As he rolled, he heard the sharp report of a six-shooter, then another. He came to rest on his left elbow, conscious of the sudden explosion of increased pain in his side, expecting to see Catlin sprawling on the ground.

Instead, he saw the burly figure of Catlin between him and Hawkins, still lunging toward the lanky puncher. Slim, diverted by Lee Bartlett's sudden action, must have fired wild. Catlin might be wounded, but he was not downed.

Those great hands were reaching now for Hawkins' throat; Slim would not have another chance to fire. Satisfied, Lee turned his attention to the others.

The three had been caught flat-footed. They were just now going into action. Of a sudden Lee's head was clear, in spite of the pain in his body—or perhaps because of it—and his hand was steady as he brought his gun up.

He thumbed the hammer twice in rapid succession, and saw one of the three crumple. The remaining two had their guns out now, and bullets were spattering around Lee in the dust. He felt one hit him, but he didn't know where. The individual pain of it was lost in the vast pain of his body.

He shot again and saw another desperado stagger and slump, then snapped a quick shot at the other but missed, and knew that he had but one bullet left. This one must count. He forced himself to steady his arm and take deliberate aim.

The survivor, he saw, was the squat man whom at first he hadn't recognized. Now he knew that the squat man must be the one who had ridden line with Hawkins. The name Wes had given him flashed into Lee's mind: Miles Gentry.

Gentry had the same idea Lee had, evidently. He was aiming with deliberation. He, too, most likely had but a single shot left, and knew that it must count. The two shots would probably

come simultaneously. It was in the cards that both Lee and Gentry would be mortally wounded.

BUT NOW, a strange thing happened. The gangling figure of Hawkins, spread-eagled, came flying through the air, blotting from Lee's eyes the form of Gentry. It struck, and the two went down, with Hawkins on top. Puzzled, Lee held his fire as Gentry's shot went wild.

The lumbering form of Catlin came between Lee's eyes and the sky, went diving toward the writhing bodies on the ground. Then Lee understood what had happened. Catlin had picked Hawkins up bodily, whether dead or alive, and had thrown him like a projectile at Gentry.

Lee relaxed. That situation was taken care of; he would have no further use for his gun. For a moment, he gave himself to the overpowering weakness that had overcome him, slumping gratefully to the ground. Blood was gushing, he knew, not only from the old wound but from new ones.

But he couldn't give way to it yet. There was Wes lying yonder in the shack, perhaps hurt and in need of assistance, certainly in need of reassurance. Lee pushed himself painfully to his feet and stood swaying, oblivious to the raging battle that went on between Catlin and the two remaining rustlers.

His progress toward the shack was not so much a walk as one prolonged fall. He left a trail of blood, he was aware, as he went toward the open door. He staggered through and saw Wes in a corner, trussed up but apparently unharmed. He had a vague impression of a look of terror in Wes's face that changed to one of gladness. Then the impression faded, everything else faded.

Lee fell forward into blackness. He didn't feel himself hit the dirt floor of the line shack.

THERE WAS a period—how long, he didn't know, but possibly days—of alternate sleeping and drowsy awakening, mostly sleeping. He was aware of the pain in his body and of the fact that he was swathed in bandages, and he knew somehow that he was in Wes's room in the Henderson home. And he was conscious that a woman ministered to his wants, and gradually became aware that the woman was Myra.

Then he came fully awake and saw Myra moving about the room, tidying it. He watched idly for a few minutes, discovering that the sight of her roused in him only a vast contentment, not the old singing of his pulses. But then, he realized, he probably didn't have enough blood left in him to make very much of a song.

She turned and saw that he was awake, and a gladness came into her eyes. The lines had left her face, Lee saw. Myra was happy again.

"Everything's all right, then?" he asked, as if resuming a conversation.

"Oh, yes!" Myra said. The same gladness was in her voice that was in her eyes.

"Catlin came around, did he?"

"Mister Catlin's our friend now," Myra told him. "But the main thing is that you're going to get well, Lee. The doctor thought you wouldn't at first, you know."

She busied herself again at the task she had been doing, straightening up about the room. But she lingered at the task, and Lee knew that she was as reluctant to leave the room as he was to have her leave it.

"Myra," he asked abruptly, "would you have cared very much if I hadn't got well?"

"Lee! What a question to ask!" But her eyes were avoiding his.

"Would you?" Lee insisted.

"Of course I would have." Then after a moment she faced him squarely, and her eyes were candid. "Lee, is it

possible for a good woman to love two men at once?"

"It's possible," Lee said. "Do you, Myra?"

"Three," Myra said— "you and Aaron and Wes. And, Lee, I don't want to do anything to hurt any of you. Please don't ask me any more."

She turned then, and was gone, but she left Lee discovering that he still had blood in his veins.

A SHORT TIME later, she came back ushering in visitors. The visitors were Wes and Catlin. Since there was only one chair in the room, the two, with Myra, stood close to Lee's cot, while Wes told the good news.

Aaron was buying the eight sections in Wes's name, to be his at twenty-one, when he would become a partner in the KT. In the meantime, he would ride for the KT and learn the cattle business under the tutelage of Knight and Catlin.

"He'll make a damn' good man," Catlin said, "to take over when me and Knight hang up our saddles."

"I thought Knight was losing the ranch," Lee said.

That, too, was explained. Knight, it seemed, had received a letter granting him the time he needed to pull out of his financial hole.

"But we woulda been sunk," Catlin said, "if it hadn't been for this young buckaroo here. Thanks to him, we got every damn' head of our cattle back."

"Shucks!" Wes said. "I was just plain lucky, that's all." But his eyes were shining.

Which brought them to the main purpose of the visit. There was other KT range, Wes said, that was subject to sale. Knight hoped to straighten out his lease muddle, hoped that the next session of the Texas Legislature would give him relief, but he couldn't be sure. Knight wasn't eligible to buy the land in his own name, but if Lee would care to buy it, coming in as a partner, Knight would see that he got the necessary backing.

"Will you do it, Lee?" Wes urged. "You said you was ready to hang up your plough handles, anyway."

"That's what I said," Lee conceded.

He looked at Myra, and was tempted. If he were to settle down on the KT, it would mean that he would always be near Myra, and the thought was pleasing. He read in Myra's eyes the message that the thought was also pleasing to her, but at the same time frightening. Lee looked from her to Wes and knew that these were the two he loved, and that, like Myra, he had no wish to hurt the ones he loved.

"Wes," he said, "that was good advice I gave you. Don't ever take up my brand of plough handles. But it's too late for me, I reckon. Thanks just the same, but I don't believe I can take you up on your offer."

"But, Lee," Myra asked, "what will you do?"

Lee Bartlett shrugged his one good shoulder. "I hear the XIT is having rustler trouble on their northern ranges. Soon as I'm able to ride again, I think I'll drift up that way and see if I can put my gun to work."

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CALIFORNIA'S discovery in 1848 was gold; in 1849 it was crime. The quantity of gold to be found in the ground and in the rivers of the distant empire was incredible; but almost as unbelievable was the universal honesty that prevailed, in the face of the discovery, for the first year of frantic goldmining. It wasn't until the hordes of hungry gold-seekers began to descend from all corners of the earth in '49, that official courts of law even became necessary.

In '48 there was still more than enough for everybody. Anybody who wanted to bother could get rich; it was almost easier to get gold from the earth than to take it from another man. What was surprising was not that nobody bothered stealing gold—but that nobody stole tools, clothes, whiskey, or personal possessions. Everybody had gold; nobody had anything else. The stores were emptied of their stocks very soon after the rush to the mines started, and it was no uncommon sight to see a man with thousands of dollars worth of gold on his person, dressed in rags, and desperately looking for tools to borrow so that he could get back to his prospecting.

And yet, during that time, tools were always left in miners' shacks, unguarded. Supplies of food were laid in, and left for the use of the next fellow, on the assumption—usually well-founded—that they would be replaced as soon as possible. Anybody could get a loan from anybody. It was not at all unusual to be approached by a perfect stranger and asked for a loan of anything from five dollars to fifty ounces of gold—or more. It *was* unusual to refuse, and even more unusual to make the loan and not have it returned. The only security necessary was that the applicant have the appearance of a hard-working man, because any man who worked at digging at all, could make enough to repay his loans without difficulty.

But in '49, everything changed. "We needed no law until the lawyers came," one old pioneer used to say, but it would be hard to tell who came first,

the lawyers or the lawbreakers. When gold was first discovered, California had been the property of the United States for only a few weeks. The Mexican government was gone; the American government was not yet organized. Larger towns, like San Francisco and the Pueblo de Los Angeles each had one official, called an alcalde, who was legislator, administrator, and judiciary, all in one. There was a Military Governor for the area, but his authority was severely limited, and with the first discoveries, the problem of claims and counter-claims to land arose.

THE MINERS chose a quick and easy solution. In each district they formed their own meetings, chose their own alcalde, and laid down local regulations for size of claims and qualifications. When disputes arose, the alcalde would settle them, for a fee of a few ounces, charged against the man who lost the suit, or for nothing, if the loser had no dust. In criminal cases, a man who desired a jury could get one by producing an ounce of dust apiece for the jurors. This may seem unfair. Actually, the 20 ounces or so in total fees was a small amount for a miner in '48; and if he didn't have it, he could almost surely raise it simply on request.

The miners' courts may have lacked something in dignity and tradition, but they made up for it in efficiency and a rude, but hearty, justice. There were no jails at first—nobody was going to stay away from the gold-mines guarding a prisoner—so the forms of punishment for crime were pretty much limited to floggings and hangings. Basically it was lynch law and lynch punishment—but it was not lynch spirit. The object was to dispose of serious trouble-makers, not to witness a mob-killing; miners' juries, picked at random, of from three to three hundred men, were likely to deliberate as seriously as any present-day sensational murder case jury. In one case the jury stayed out two days trying to make up their minds whether a fellow named Doherty was a horse-thief. The miners around Colma began to get impatient when two major robberies occurred during the two days. The jurors finally got together on a decision when a mob of local residents paid them a visit with the information that if they didn't reach a verdict in a hurry, they'd probably be strung up themselves.

But generally speaking, mining-town justice did not reach the extreme of deliberation displayed by that jury, nor the extreme of impatience displayed by the mob. The first record of a hanging in the gold district was at Dry Diggings, which spot was almost immediately renamed Hangtown. It has since taken on a new name—Placerville—but it was as Hangtown that the spot became famous.

Five men had been convicted by a miners' court for the robbery of a Mexican gambler named Lopez. Each of them was sentenced to thirty-five lashes, and the whole community of two hundred miners turned out to watch. As a result, they were all present when, right after the public flogging, someone accused three of those present, two gents named Garcia and Bissi (who appear as "Frenchmen" in the records), and one named Manuel, who came from Chile, of a crime committed several months earlier at another mining camp. The three of them were supposed to have robbed another man and attempted to murder him.

With all two hundred miners present acting as a jury, the men were tried and sentenced to death. The trial took thirty minutes all told, and it didn't take much longer to carry out the sentence, on the branches of a big tree right in the center of the camp. From that time on, Dry Diggings was Hangtown, and the short period of almost absolute honesty in the gold mines had come to an end.

THE RULE of the miners' courts was short-lived. By the end of 1850, official courts of the United States were dealing out official punishment. The last lynch-hanging at Hangtown took place a year and a half after the first one. By that time the little camp of two hundred miners had become a small city complete with sheriff, two constables, and a Justice of the Peace. More important, it had acquired a number of superior gambling-and-liquor establishments, and, with them, a class of professional gamblers who, for the most part, were more than willing to relieve the legal officials of the problems involved in running a mining town.

Richard Crone was a young Irishman who drifted into town with a reputation already established in New Orleans and elsewhere that had earned him the sanguine nickname of Bloody Dick. Dick got a job dealing monte at the El Dorado, and did all right until his temper got the best of him one evening. He got into a fight with a customer, and didn't know when to stop. Unfortunately, neither did the customer. More unfortunate—that is, for himself—Dick went home that evening with whatever satisfaction in his heart a man can get from fatally stabbing an opponent in an argument.

That might have been the end of the matter; apparently Bloody Dick expected it would be—for he made no move to leave town, although everyone at the table had seen the murder committed. He slept that night peacefully in his own cabin, but it was his last night's sleep on Earth.

By, morning, the news of the fight and its results had spread among all the two thousand miners who by now honey-combed the territory around the town. It is hard to understand how the word got around, and how it happened that the next morning prospectors and miners from lonely tents and isolated shacks throughout the neighborhood had gathered in Hangtown.

However it happened, they were there, determined to avenge the murdered man, and to end, once and for all, the domination of the town by the gamblers. They dragged Bloody Dick from his cabin, and, right there in the street, in the middle of the milling crowd, Justice Humphries heard the eye-witness evidence to the crime, and committed Crone to the custody of Uncle Billy Rogers, the Sheriff, pending his formal trial.

Rogers didn't have time to take more than a step toward his prisoner, before a lariat snaked out of the crowd, and landed around Bloody Dick's neck, the noose ready to tighten in an instant.

But that wasn't the kind of finish the crowd wanted for Crone. His death was as much a symbol as a punishment; they marched him to the gallows tree in the center of town, where the first hanging had taken place, and strung him up. A few days later, the tree was cut down. It was Hangtown's last lynching.

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He was a lone wolf on the trail of wolves, but Ed Danver, sheriff of Clinton should have known that Deputy Marshal Jeremy Harte was coming his way. Or — did Danver know, and had he arranged an ambush...?

THE SHARP, rattling burst of a gunshot echoed through the hills, bounding and rebounding along the deep, dark corridors in the pines. Close on the heels of that shot came another. Again the swaying

pines caught up the crashing sound and flung it up and down the rugged shoulders of the timbered headlands.

The sober-eyed, heavy-thewed rider on the blue roan dug in his spurs and, leaning low over the hull, ribbed his mount up the long grade that stretched out before him. Jeremy Harte, Deputy U. S. marshal, loosened the flapless, open holsters that were thonged low on both thighs; a line of strict, savage attention flashed across his irregular features.

He was wide of shoulder, lean of hip, with slate gray eyes whose unsmiling depths matched the fighting hardness of his square jaw. Dark hair pushed below the brim of his wide Stetson and he rode the swiftly running horse with an ease borne of many years spent in the saddle.

Topping the crest of the timbered ridge, Harte sent the roan charging down the yonder slope in a hoof-hammering gallop. Below him in a little clearing, a buckskin pony, writhing in death's agony, let out a blood-curdling, trumpeting scream. Stretched out beside the cayuse was the motionless figure of a man. And spurring away from the scene was another rider mounted on a snow-white horse. The rider, streaking across the flat toward the timber, threw a wild glance at Harte and kept on.

Harte's hand jutted to his scabbard and came up Colt-filled. He slapped a wild shot at the bouncing rider, missed, then thumbed the hammer viciously again as the rump of that snow-white horse disappeared through the screening trees. Harte slammed his racing mount off the narrow trail, thundered across the clearing and on into the pines again.

Somewhere ahead, the marshal could hear the heavy crashing of a horse's progress through the dense forest. He drove toward that sound with a grim-eyed recklessness, then lost it over the brow of a steep knoll beyond which ran several dim trails heavily carpeted with pine needles and the humus of decaying leaves.

Abruptly, the marshal abandoned the chase and returned to the unfortunate victim of the gun-ambush. Dismounting beside the fallen rider, he ground-hobbled the roan and turned the man over on his back. The face that met the lawman's keen inspection was a thoroughly unpleasant one, smooth and beardless, with a mouth like a knife slash and ugly, red-rimmed eyes that were now glazed and sightless. It was the face of Len Bixby, known to Harte as ace gun-slinger of Kit Tallman's owlhoot band, which had been terrorizing the state with a series of bank, train and ranch robberies.

Nothing disturbed the set of the marshal's face, but a strange brightness began to glitter in his eyes. It was opportune that he should run into this killing when he was on the trail of Tallman himself. Stepping over the broad, widening pool of crimson beneath the gunman, he approached the horse which was now dead, and removed a pair of bulging saddlebags from the saddle. A hasty examination revealed that the bags were generously filled with loose gold coins.

Jeremy Harte lifted his head slowly. He was a big man, with heavy arms and wrists almost as broad as his hands. A still intensity covered his irregular features and his voice, grim, sharp but undisturbed, broke out in quiet musing.

"By the looks o' them saddlebags, hombre, I reckon you've been on some booger business on yore own hook; or what's more likely, you were nailed runnin' off with the takin's o' Kit Tallman's last bank job. Which would easily explain the presence o' the dry-gulchin' gent on the white horse an' yore unhappy killin'. Said gent bein' none other Tallman himself, if I ain't mis-

taken. Leastwise that white cayuse was his.

"I reckon that Tallman hombre would give a year o' his life for that gold yuh were totin', friend Bixby; but bein' the low-livered skunk that he is, he lit a shuck for other parts when he seen me an' my horse comin' along. Well, the sheriff o' Clinton'll be right glad to get this gold."

"Yuh're right about the sheriff bein' glad to get that gold, stranger," blared a harsh, grating voice from the edge of the timber several yards behind the marshal, "only *you* ain't gonna take it to him. Lift them dew c l a w s an' be quick!"

HARTE TURNED slowly, not lifting his hands, and faced three swarthy, hard-bitten men who rode out of the timber, six-guns leveled in their fists. The lawman's slate-gray eyes rolled out a faint wildness but his hands remained immobile at his sides.

Gregg Folger, the long-boned, narrow-chinned gent who rode in the center, edged his big bay nearer. An untidy beard almost completely buried his jaw and his w a t e r y, yellow eyes held a definite glint of brutality.

"We heard two shots an' rattled our hocks up here tuh see what was what," he informed Harte. "It looks like we was just in time to be in on a killin'."

"You've got it all figgered out, huh?"

One of the other riders s p u r r e d around behind Harte and stared down at the dead man.

"Hell, Gregg! It's Ike Lacy!" Folger emitted a loud, angry roar. He pushed beyond the other riders for a better view and then turned fierce eyes on the marshal.

"Friend, yuh signed yore own death warrant, killin' Lacy!"

A cold smile tugged the lawman's long lips apart and his voice reached out to these men, thin and dry and bitter: "So you heard the shots an' come gallopin' up to see what the r u c k u s was about. That's damned interestin'. Funny, yuh didn't make any noise comin' up. Of course that could be explained if you were back in the timber all the while watchin' the play with the jasper on the white horse!"

"Meanin' just what?" bit out Folger.

Harte kept watching these men, grimly and bleakly, and the crisp line of his thoughts pulled his lids together.

"I'll make it p l a i n," he murmured thinly. "You're a damned poor liar 'cause this gent's handle ain't Lacy. It's Len Bixby; an' he's wanted by the law for cattle rustlin', bank robbery an' several murders. I reckon yuh fellers are friends o' his an' that skunk on the white horse who killed him."

A fleeting expression of surprise rushed across Folger's face, but he banished it with a snarling grimace.

"Stranger," he muttered, yellow eyes building up anger, "that gent who just cashed in his chips was our boss, foreman o' the Circle O ranch up in the hills. I reckon dyin' ain't changed his name any, so it's still Ike Lacy to us. Somehow yuh found out he was comin' out from t o w n with the monthly payroll an' yuh waited for him to come by. That was too bad for poor Ike, but it's gonna be lots worse for you." Swiftly he turned to one of the other riders and said: "Get his guns an' we'll soon see who did the killin'."

The rider addressed came up to the marshal and there was a brief, fleeting moment when a driving pressure in Harte's muscles almost prompted him to go fanning for his guns. Though all these men had their weapons out, he knew he could down one, possibly two of them, before his body would be tunneled by slugs. The pressure finally left him, and he decided to wait. He let the gunman take his Colts and listened with an idle care while they exclaimed with glee at finding two chambers emp-

ty in his right-hand gun and the barrel recently fouled by smoke.

Gregg Folger palmed the marshal's gun and his dark, untidy face was touched with triumph as he spoke.

"I reckon them two spent shells in this here hogleg sorta puts the clincher on yore guilt, mister," he stated, his tone definitely harsh and nasal. "One shot for the horse, an' the other for poor Ike."

Harte watched these men around him with a narrowing interest and his face suddenly screwed tight.

"Afore you gents come along I had a good gander at them saddlebags an' they're holdin' more coin than any ranch hereabouts'll earn in a year. That makes yore payroll yarn sound a mite queer." The marshal's shoulders squared a little and mockery lay in his eyes as he snapped: "Where's Kit? Waitin' for yuh to bring the gold to him?"

THE QUESTION struck the men with the solid shock of a crushing bullet. Harte's sharp, sweeping glance caught their fleeting changes of expression, the swift blanching of Folger's sun-scorched features, then the gradual return of blood.

"That kinda hit home, didn't it?" Harte said thinly.

Hate flowed in silent fluid motion from Gregg Folger's yellow eyes and he swung his knuckled fist against the marshal's mouth.

"Mebbe it did an' mebbe not," grated the gunman, "but as far as you're concerned, we don't know any Kit Tallman or Len Bixby. This gent is Ike Lacy, an' yuh're gonna pay for his killin'."

The force of the blow knocked Harte back against the cantle of his saddle. A trickle of blood started from his mouth corner. The angles of his cheeks and jaw turned hard and rock-like, but his calmness grew and his talk, soft and smooth, fell like dripping acid on the other gent.

"That's a debt I'll owe yuh, friend," said Harte grimly. He smiled grimly to himself as he considered Folger's rash reply. In spite of the man's vigorous denial, the significance of Folger's knowing Tallman's first name, and the very evident shock that had appeared on all their faces at the marshal's mention of the notorious outlaw, was not lost on Harte. Tallman's name was one to bring terror to every man in the state. Folger's statement that he had never heard of Tallman was equivalent to admitting that he was in league with the outlaw.

"That debt'll never be paid, mister," responded Folger, laughing harshly. "The penalty for killin' 'round here is hangin'; an' I reckon me an' my pards will be doin' the town o' Clinton a favor by savin' it the expense o' yore neck-jerkin'."

At a signal from Folger, the other two riders rammed their horses against the blue roan and made a grab for the marshal's arms. Harte fought them off, pounding one gent behind the ear with a vicious right and nearly unseating the other with a backhand cuff. A stream of profanity issued from Folger's lips and he quickly loosed his lasso rope, twirled a loop and sent it hurtling toward the lawman.

Caught in the center of milling horses and wildly swinging men, Harte tried to dodge the swishing hemp but failed. With a soft, whispering sigh the noose settled over his head, looped around the neck and drove the air from his lungs in a gusty breath as Folger hauled the rope tight. Blood rushed into the marshal's face and the noose cut into his throat, gagging him. Suddenly he felt light-headed. He offered no resistance as his arms were pinioned roughly behind his back and his hands were lashed together with pigging string.

When he had been rendered help-

less, Folger let up on the lass rope, easing the choking pressure on Jeremy Harte's throat. Then somebody slapped the roan on the rump and the animal bolted up the slight grade in company with the other horses.

"That live oak thicket by the hogback yonder'll do the trick fine," said Folger to the others.

In a few seconds, the gunmen had prodded their victim to the designated thicket. Beneath a stout oak with wide heavy branches, the group halted. Holstering their guns, Folger's hard-eyed companions watched with pleasure while Jeremy Harte himself made several futile casts with the end of the rope before he succeeded in looping it over a low limb. Snubbing the end tightly about the saddle horn, Folger jerked the rope taut until all the slack had been taken up and he could see the noose biting into the flesh about the marshal's neck.

A great throbbing blue vein stood out on Harte's forehead. His irregular feaures were quickly flooded with a reddening scorch beneath the deep brown of his skin. Blood pounded in his head and again he felt a nauseating light-headedness. Grimly he fought to keep his senses.

Behind his back, his tremendous hands writhed against the confining bond of the pigging string. Sweat studded his brow and his mouth snapped into a thin, determined line as he forced his broad wrists sidewise. Watching him, the three gunmen grinned with gloating satisfaction. They saw the mounting scorch of his face, the dripping sweat, the slight dizzy sway in the saddle. They had their long moment of pleasure while Harte wrenched at his bonds. The pigging string slashed into his wrists, slitting the skin.

Sharp pain punished the marshal but with all the sinewy power in his broad wrists, he forced his balled fists sidewise and felt the thongs give slightly.

"WELL, MISTER" taunted Folger, yellow eyes afire, "I reckon we owe yuh a vote o' thanks for givin' us this chance to see yuh writhe afore we boot that roan o' yores in the rump an' send yuh to kingdom come. Mebbe if yore neck is tough, it won't break right away. In that case we'll try again."

Although his strength was being sapped from him in great waves, and red and yellow lights danced before his eyes, Harte rallied sufficiently to give the gunmen about him a scornful glance.

"Yuh got anythin' to say, friend, afore that rope breaks yore neck?" Folger demanded with a laugh, in which he was joined by the others.

Harte's jaw moved and his lips parted as though he were going to speak, then closed again.

"Can't yuh see he's savin' his breath for blowin' out Hell's fire?" broke in one of the other riders, a cadaverous-looking hombre with a hawk-like nose.

Harte was struggling desperately to maintain his balance in the saddle, as blackness threatened to engulf him, when Folger signalled the rider who had last spoken, to quirt the roan. The marshal's head throbbed and heaved. The ground pitched and bucked before his eyes like the deck of a ship wallowing in heavy seas. Somewhere behind him, there was a sharp cracking sound as the quirt descended on the roan's flanks. The horse snorted and leaped away, shooting out from beneath Harte's body like a blurring streak.

With the saddle sliding away from him, the marshal gave another desperate tug at his bonds. The rope seared and burned into his wrists but finally gave way. Suddenly his hands came free. Even as his heavy frame left the hull and swung out over the ground at the end of the rope that jerked taut

and stiff, Harte's half-numb left fist shot upward, clawing the hemp.

For a brief, agonizing second the noose about his throat trembled and heaved with an ever-growing pressure. His face purpled and his eyes protruded from his face. Then that heavily thewed left arm, with the muscles rippling and writhing like corded bands of steel, combatted the tightening stricture. With the speed of light, the marshal's right hand whipped back to a concealed sheath behind his neck and ripped out a glittering knife blade.

One swift, hacking slash at that rope and it parted, dropping him to the ground. For a moment he sprawled on hands and knees. Then, with the noose still about his windpipe and the loose end trailing after him, Harte flung himself in a lurching leap at the gent who had quirted the roan. A startled cry burst from the latter's lips. A bony hand groped for a sixgun but was not quick enough.

For a moment the other two men were too startled to actually realize what had taken place and they sat their mounts without movement. Harte catapulted into the gunman near him. The latter's horse reared up on hind legs. There was the rasp of gunmetal on leather and the flash of a bright, shining blade in the sunlight. Then a torn cry as Harte's keeneged blade bit through gristle and bone, sinking to the hilt in the hombre's chest. A vivid blotch of crimson swept in a widening tide across the gun-slinger's shirt front. He fell in a limp, soggy heap to the ground, the six-gun he had tried to fire, suddenly appearing in Harte's fist.

With muttered oaths, Folger and his companion roared into action. Long-barreled Colts leaped into their hands, boomed and spat flame. Harte skirted the dead outlaw's horse and slapped a wild shot at Folger from under the animal's belly. Folger and the other man fired again, their shots whipping up small geysers of dust at the lawman's feet, as the terrified horse wheeled and bucked. Folger's right-hand Colt crashed. The horse screamed as a horneting slug ripped into its chest. It toppled in a rolling heap, leaving the marshal at the mercy of lobo guns.

HARTE'S thumb rippled across the hammer of the bucking six-gun in his fist. His second shot took the rider beside Folger full in the throat and he pitched out of the saddle. Sliding and side-stepping in the face of the deadly cross-fire from Folger's guns, Harte heard the "thwutt" of searching slugs that sang past him in a singing shower, rattling over the hard-packed earth and rubble behind him.

Something like a hot band of steel was laid along the edge of his neck, and he heard the whispering passage of hot lead. The sudden hit and a shallow depression in the ground threw Harte onto his knees. Fifty feet in front of him on a pitching, rearing horse, Folger's stubble-bearded face peered at him through drifting smoke haze. A brace of sixguns caught shoulder high on the recoil were descending again when Harte took a deliberate bead on the man and dropped hammer.

A round blue hole magically appeared in the center of Folger's forehead, and his guns dropped from lifeless fingers. He swayed drunkenly in the saddle. Slowly his stirrups dragged upward and he flipped over the cantle. He struck the ground on his skull and lay in an inert and broken heap.

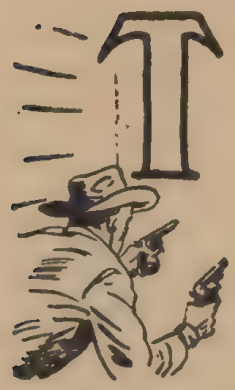
Harte got to his feet, his big frame thoroughly punished by the ordeal he had gone through. An ugly red welt circled his throat. His wrists were cut and bleeding. From a shallow bullet gash on his neck blood dripped in bright red drops. But he stood on his feet, swaying slightly, a big and heavy man with full settled lips, a lean hard

jaw and slate gray eyes that were humorlessly smiling.

"I reckon that pays up our little debt with interest," Harte said slowly, looking down at the graying face of Gregg Folger.

The marshal turned on his heel and marched to a clump of mesquite where his own ivory-handled Colts had been tossed. Jacking the spent shells out of the right-hand gun, he inserted fresh loads and lopped the belts around his waist. He picked up the gold-filled saddlebags and slung them across his own hull. Then, catching up the roan, he sprang into the saddle and put the horse into a quick run along the rutted trail to Clinton.

- 2 -



THE SUMMER sun was well past its zenith in the blue, cloudless sky when Jeremy Harte dropped down a low grade and cantered into the north end of Clinton. Bright sunglare glittered on the dry alkali dust in the street, scorching the weather-worn frame buildings that lined the street, and drawing the lawman's lids together in a peering squint.

A slow wind drifted out of the south whirling dust into the air in short spirals. The drumming beat of the roan's hoofs was a sharp, staccato sound in the strange, drowsing stillness. Harte's attention swept this town, registering all its details, noting at once its silent, deserted aspect. The plank walks were devoid of people. No sound came from the dark, yawning mouth of the blacksmith shop; no men loitered in the streets or beneath the board awnings of the few stores.

The only sign of life were three drowsing horses, heads down and turned away from the sun's driving heat, reins looped around the hitch rack in front of the saloon. Harte jogged past the frame structure, slate-gray eyes picking out a dead-faced gent leaning against the wall near the bat-wing doors. The man watched the rider's passage with an idle curiosity and remained entirely motionless.

The silence and the stillness hammered at the marshal, building up a tenseness in his muscles and a sudden, nameless unease. Clinton was like a ghost town and Harte wanted to know why.

He hauled up in front of a murky adobe building with a barred-window section at the rear, which he took to be the jail. He lifted the gold-filled saddlebags from his saddle, pegged across the walk, and on through the half-open door of the sheriff's office. In the dim, shady interior he found the same emptiness, the same dull quiet that marked the entire town.

The marshal came outside again, lifted the bags back to his hull and clumped down the walk to the saloon. As his spurred boots hit the bottom step, he noted that the lounger who had been against the wall, had disappeared. This fact rang a shrill bell of warning in the back of his mind and he checked the easy hang of his six-guns.

He mounted to the veranda, his clumping progress knocking dull echoes out of the afternoon stillness. His narrowing attention picked up the sliding, scuffling sound of feet beyond the bat-wing doors and then the sudden flush of utter quiet. No voices drifted out to him and this was strange.

He struck the bat-wing doors with the full weight of his shoulders, crashed into the barroom, and threw himself in a half-sprawl on the floor as the thundering bellow of guns ripped the silence apart. Bullets spattered the wall behind the lawman, and the shadowy gloom was painted in pulsing tongues of yellow and red flame.

Even as he hit the floor, Harte was unlimbering his long-barreled Colts and throwing down on three dimly massed figures in a far corner of the room. He rolled across the boards, both guns vomiting flame and smoke and hot lead. Bullets slammed back at him in a blighting spray.

Something warm and hot slid over his shoulder, and pain punished the nerves of his left arm. But he didn't stop firing. All his movements were masked by a vivid sheet of flame as his bucking weapons sent their death-laden hail across the room.

The massed figures in the corner fell apart. One man lifted his hands high, then jack-knifed forward, crashing down upon a table and upending it in his plummeting course to the floor. Another hitched sidewise, thumbing his Peacemaker, and was cut down by a brace of tunneling slugs through the heart. He was followed by a third gent, cursing in pain and agony, hands gripping his bullet-dotted middle.

Out of the shadows, still another man dissolved, flinging a wild shot at Harte, who rose to his feet and paced forward, cuffing the cocked hammers of his Colts. Both firing pins jammed down on empty chambers, and the man leaped through the rear window and scuttled away. Harte let him go and reloaded his guns.

THE RATTLE and pound of galloping hoofs, drawing near, could be heard outside and the marshal backed to the wall. He cast a sidelong glance at his three victims lying in a grotesque huddle beside the upended table.

Horses slid to a halt in front of the saloon. Men's voices lifted on the air. Boots scuffed across the short-veranda, and the bat-wing doors burst inward as several breathless, grim-eyed men, cocked six-guns bristling in their fists, barged through.

"What in hell's all the ruckus about?" rasped a roan-headed man with a bony face and a pointed nose. A battered tin star hung loosely to his spotted calf-hide vest.

"You're a little late to get in the show, sheriff," Harte told him dryly, indicating the sprawled forms a few feet away.

"Yeah? Well, who are yuh an' what's the shootin' for?" Sheriff Ed Danver said in a disagreeable, rasping tone of voice.

Harte studied the man coolly, meeting the cold stare of the dark, unpleasant eyes. Besides his calfhide vest the sheriff wore baggy trousers with a checkered shirt and a battered black sombrero.

"Jeremy Harte's the name," the marshal stated thinly, pulling aside his own bull-hide vest to disclose a gleaming star. "Deputy U.S. Marshal, an' I can't say the folks in this town are polite. These three jaspers just tried to blow daylight through me but I had to change their plans as you can see."

The sheriff raised his brown eyes and regarded the marshal with what might have passed for mingled hostility and grudging admiration. He jerked his thumb at a tall, rangy gent beside him, a deputy.

"Take a gander at them hombres."

"Afore yuh an' yore party arrived, I thought this was a ghost town. There was nobody around but them low-livered skunks in the corner," said Harte.

Through the rear door plunged a stocky, ruddy-faced man. By his stained apron Harte recognized him to be the bartender.

"What in hell's goin' on here? I heard the shootin' an' come runnin'," he exclaimed thickly, eyes big and round.

Harte's lips narrowed to a thin crease and his voice was sharp. "Yuh picked a good time to be outa yore saloon. How come?"

The bartender cast his eyes around

the room, noted the three dead men in the corner, and the sheriff and his party by the door. "Those gents sent me out to see if one o' their horses left at the smithy's had been shod."

"That so?" said Harte. "So yuh returned by the rear door, an' took yore own damn time comin' back from the smithy's, which was empty, to give yore sidewinder pards plenty o' time to salivate me!"

"Hold on, Harte!" interrupted Sheriff Danver, anger flushing his cheeks. "Ty Wagner here ain't one to throw in with any drygulchin' jaspers."

Harte's sandy eyebrows lifted a notch and his glance, angular and sharp, sifted the bony-faced lawman.

"So *you* say! Since it wasn't yore skin, yuh don't reckon that Wagner chose a convenient time to be away from his bar." The marshal's face pulled taut. "The way I figger it is that Wagner was in cahoots with them jaspers in the corner, an' mebbe with the lobo bunch that tried to hang me in the hills."

Danver's face registered anger, then astonishment. "What do yuh mean by that, Harte?"

Briefly the marshal recounted his experience with Folger and his pards.

"Dammit, Harte," broke out the sheriff more genially. "That's the same bunch me an' the posse were out huntin'. Some o' Kit Tallman's crew. They held up the bank in town this mornin', killed the cashier an' a customer, an' got away with fifteen thousand in gold coin. Every able-bodied man in town went out with us to scour the hills. That's why yuh found the town empty."

HARTE NODDED grimly. "I figgered that there'd been a robbery when I found all that gold. An' as for Len Bixby, I knew that jasper's face right away."

"Shore," said one of the other men in the group. "There ain't any Circle O ranch hereabouts."

"That don't surprise me," responded the marshal tersely. "An' yuh'll probably find them three skunks over there are part o' the same crew."

"I think Harte's right," agreed one of the deputies who had gone to examine the dead men closely. "These hombres are strangers tuh me an' they all look like tough customers."

"Yuh got the gold?" Danver asked of Harte suddenly.

"Yeah. Out in a pair o' saddlebags."

Danver's face lighted up. The tight skin of his bony face loosened and his lips stretched into an edged, half-smile.

"You did well, Harte," he admitted, a quizzical g l e a m in his brown eyes. "Too late to put that money in the bank now. I'll have to send one o' the boys out to Lon Meeker—he's the bank president—an' get him to come to town."

Accordingly, several of the men were put to work removing the bodies from the saloon. A deputy was sent out to bring Meeker into town, and another party of riders galloped off to haul in the men Harte had been forced to kill up in the timber.

An hour later the deputy returned with the banker. Harte and the sheriff were w a i t i n g in the latter's office. Meeker, a man in his middle forties. was medium tall and stocky. He had iron-gray hair, smoke gray eyes and a round sallow face. There was a nervous, hitching motion to his walk, but he was dressed neatly in black trousers and frock coat, under which could be seen the bulges of two six-guns.

"Harte," said the banker with a crooked grin that was not reflected in his fathomless eyes. "I owe yuh a vote o' thanks for pickin' up that gold."

The marshal took Meeker's outstretched hand, but the banker's clasp was nothing more than a brief pressure, followed by a swift withdrawal.

It laid a quick distaste in Harte's mind.

"Don't thank me," said Harte evenly. "Just doin' my duty. It happens I'm huntin' the crew that did the job."

Change stirred the banker's sallow features, and a furtive shadow flecked his eyes.

"That so? I hope yuh get him," he muttered with a strange disinterest.

"Best put that gold in yore bank," Harte warned.

"It'll have to wait," Meeker said. "When Si here—" pointing to the deputy standing near— "rode up to my place with the news, I was in such a rush to get to town, I went off without the bank key. That's pretty good, ain't it?",

HARTE FLASHED the banker a swift, bleak glance and his voice slapped out dry and displeased. "It certainly is," he murmured.

"I reckon yuh can stick the money in my little safe here," offered Danver.

Jeremy Harte glanced casually at the battered safe in the corner near the jail corridor, and judged it entirely inadequate.

"I wouldn't advise that, Meeker," he said. "Tallman an' his bunch may have a coupla spies in town watchin' to see if that gold is returned to the bank. When they see it ain't, they're shore to try an' get it back."

Meeker laughed derisively.

"Harte, yuh're on edge. Tallman wouldn't dare pull anythin' like that."

"No? "You're forgettin' he robbed yore bank in broad daylight!"

"I know," responded the banker impatiently, "but he ain't likely to make another stab at it."

Danver sided the banker's opinion and added: "That gold'll be safe enough in that old iron box till mornin'. I'll station Si in the rear alley an' let one o' the other boys watch the front. I'll stick by the safe myself an' any jasper what tries to lay his dew-claws on that dinero will have to march over my dead body."

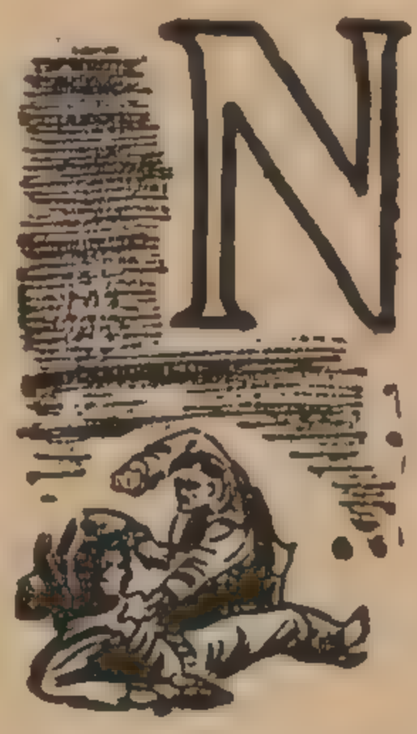
Although Harte was displeased by the careless attitude of both the sheriff and the banker in regard to protecting the gold, he did not argue the matter further.

"All right, Danver," he conceded heavily. You're the law in Clinton an' yuh can do as yuh see fit. But I'll be handy durin' the night if anythin' breaks."

"We'll call yuh if we need yuh," promised Danver with a crooked grin, "but if I know Tallman, he won't come near Clinton tonight."

The marshal had no answer for that and turned away, repairing to the two-story hotel across the street from the saloon. He got a room and went to it to wash up. Sometime later he came down again and had a late supper in the dining room.

- 3 -



NIGHT WITH its dark shifting shadows had fallen upon the land when Jeremy Harte emerged from the hotel. The sky showed its bright, full star-glitter. To the north, the heavy bulk of towering peaks and buttes loomed large and dark and defiant against the diffused shimmer of the moon's silver crescent.

Harte crossed to the saloon hitch rack, a trifle annoyed with himself for forgetting to take care of the roan. Loosing the reins he led the stallion to the livery stable down the street's end, threw off the saddle, and left directions with the hostler to have the animal fed.

Later, he walked past the sheriff's office, seeing the yellow bar of lamp-

light that sifted through the murky windows, and placing the lawman's indolent shape near the safe. One of the deputies, a lazy motionless shape along the walk, nodded carelessly as the marshal drifted by.

Harte came back, his nerves prodded by a vague unrest. Waiting was a trial for the big man. His large, muscular frame required action, and, as though it were already established, he was certain that Tallman's renegade band would make an attempt to get the gold, and that they knew where it was.

He turned into the saloon, took a corner table and sat idly watching Clinton's night life build up. Horses clattered to a halt outside. Men drifted in and out of the barroom, making a free and easy racket. But in the back of Harte's mind there still lingered a definite unease.

The drygulching of Len Bixby, the ruckus with Folger and his pards, who were surely some of Tallman's men, was clear enough. Bixby, no doubt, had been attempting to pull a double-cross and had been shot by Tallman, who had fled at the marshal's sudden appearance. Tallman, of course, had been unwilling to risk a shoot-out with Harte. Therefore, Folger and his pards had been ordered to get Harte out of the way.

But there still remained the four men who had tried to gun him in the saloon. Save for the fact that the strange silence and desertion of the town had put him on guard, he would have been blasted to kingdom come. But he was half prepared for trouble when those men opened fire on him. Perhaps, they were some of Tallman's crew. But if they were after the gold, why hadn't they ambushed him in the hills instead of waiting for him in town while the posse was actually hunting them?

Suddenly the marshal's face grew grim-lined as a suspicion flashed into his mind. Perhaps the jaspers in the saloon hadn't known he was carrying gold. If such were the case, there could be but one explanation of their attack upon him. Somehow Tallman had discovered that a United States marshal had been put on his trail, and he had laid a trap for Harte.

YET, SUPPOSING that his arrival had been expected, there still remained the question of how the outlaw had obtained this knowledge. Then suddenly it came to Harte that the only man in town who could possibly have known that he was on his way to pick up Tallman's trail, was the sheriff himself. Harte remembered, too, that Marshal Fred Wayne, his superior, had said he might send word to Danver to expect Harte as soon as the latter had finished up some business in Wolf Creek.

The thought that Kit Tallman might be working with Danver drove cold, rash anger hammering along the deputy marshal's nerves. It made him recall with startling clarity the sheriff's shifty eyes and his ill-concealed eagerness to leave the gold in his own office safe. It made him wonder if Danver himself hadn't planted the ambushers in the saloon and then used the Tallman man-hunt as a pretext for being out of town.

The angry turmoil of his thoughts forced Harte out into the street again where he remained for an hour or more, posted in the shadows by the general store, watching the sheriff's office, and grimly fighting the desire to force Danver to show his hand.

The moon had climbed higher, dimming the sky's star-brilliance and the town had grown definitely quiet when Harte left his place and pegged down the walk to the livery barn. He had made up his mind to saddle the roan and be ready for trouble if anything broke. As he passed the saloon the

banker came out, nodded briefly and went across the street to the hotel.

Harte reached the stable and paused by the dimly lighted entrance. Out of the tail of his eye he saw a furtive shape slink out of an abandoned feed barn near the general store, and drift into an alley. After that the marshal moved with a growing speed. The hostler, half-asleep on a chair tilted against the wall, scuttled up to get the roan but Harte brushed him aside. He slapped the rig on the stallion, tightened the cinch and was about to jump aboard when the shadows in the alley stirred.

The marshal paced forward, leaving the roan by the stable's mouth, and clumped slowly along the walk, eyes and ears strained to catch the night's drifting sounds. With a scuffling rush of boots along the gravel, a hunched figure raced out of the alley to Jeremy Harte's left. A golden cord of flame leaped ahead of that running shape, and a six-gun's bellowing roar split the gloom.

Blending with that shot came another, shrill and sharp as a Colt magically appeared in the marshal's hand. Flame laced the night and the running figure halted suddenly, flopping into the rutted street. Harte, untouched by the other gent's wild-flung b u l l e t, sprinted down the walk.

Ahead of him he caught the winking flash that was the sheriff's light. It blinked twice as though someone had passed in front of the beam. Then down the street's far end Harte picked out a shimmering streak of white, and at the same time heard the muffled thud of a horse's quick run. That horse could belong to no one but Kit Tallman, and it meant the outlaw was having his try at the gold.

Harte increased his pace while other guns suddenly blasted ahead of him. He cut down a narrow passage between two buildings, heading for the rear alley. He was almost all the way down when three men dashed around the corner, six-guns belching and roaring in their fists. Harte raced on, both Colts spinning out and crashing heavily. Smoke drifted up and was pierced by red streamers of muzzle flame.

Two of the three gunmen wilted in the face of the hammering blast from the marshal's Colts. Then for a brief second Harte had a flame-painted picture of a leering, pug-nosed face behind crimson-spouting gun bores. The orange light dimmed and something hot and f i e r y laid a scorching finger across Harte's skull. He spun to the ground slowly, still bucking and roaring.

- 4 -

JEREMY HARTE groped his way out of the black some minutes later and found a group of men massed about him. He put his right hand to his scalp and brought it away warm and sticky.

"The bullet just nicked yuh, Marshal," one of the men told him. "A little deeper an' all yore worries would 'a' been over."

Eager hands helped Harte to his feet. He wiped some of the blood from his face and scalp with a handkerchief. His legs were a trifle unsteady, but he hobbled toward the main street, where the shouts of swiftly gathering men mingled with the drum of hoofs.

"Tallman got the gold, I suppose," Harte said disgustedly, breaking into a lurching run.

"That's what," agreed a wiry oldster, jogging along as fast as he could on stumpy, bowed legs. "That lobo an' his bunch o' sidewinders took Sheriff Danver by surprise. Seems like the sheriff dozed off an' when he come to

some jasper conked him with a gun butt. Charley Rice was out in the alley an' was shot down. Si Norris, who had gone down to the Chink's for some coffee to stay awake, got back when Tallman's crew was skeedaddlin' outa town."

"Lucky thing Danver wasn't plugged," shouted another man as the group hit the main stem and raced at a dead run toward the livery stable.

"He was too lucky," snapped Harte, his slate-gray eyes hard and bright.

"What do yuh mean by that?" demanded the other gent.

"Let it pass," said Harte heavily. "You wouldn't understand. Come on! We're ridin'!"

In front of the sheriff's office Danver's strident voice racked the fast gathering posse.

"Rattle yore hocks, yuh crawlin' bunch o' turtles. If we don't get goin' them crooks'll scuttle away again. Si! Lou! Marty! Yuh ready? Let's ride? The rest o' you can catch up."

Wheeling their mounts, the small group of riders, with Danver in the van, galloped out of Clinton in a swirl of dust. A swarm of men milled about the stable, grabbing horses, and in the space of a few brief seconds, Harte headed another larger party of horsemen out of town.

None of the men carried lanterns because it was a clear night with the moon shedding a bright radiance over the rolling, broken land. Harte dug in his spurs and felt the roan stretch into its distance-devouring stride. As he rode he reloaded his guns, which had been emptied in the short encounter in the alley.

Harte's earlier black-tempered mood gradually gave way to a certain grim satisfaction at the turn events had taken. Kit Tallman's lightning-like strike upon the sheriff's office was the only clincher the marshal needed to prove that Danver was in cahoots with the outlaw. It was too much to expect that Tallman's band—ruthless killers all—some of whom had tried to frame and hang him for murder, while others in the saloon had attempted to shoot him down without a chance to defend himself—would be content with merely knocking Danver out when they robbed the safe, unless the sheriff were working with them.

The facts all pointed to Danver being in with Tallman. And with him, no doubt, were the deputies. Si Norris, anyway, had managed to steal away for coffee just at the moment when the raid was made. Then, there was the bartender who was quite likely in on the crooked deal. Of Meeker, the bank president, Harte was not certain; Meeker might be on the level. Yet something in the man's furtive manner, and his sudden appearance from the saloon a moment before the gent in the alley opened fire, seemed to link him with the others,.

THEN SUDDENLY there flashed up in Harte's mind the vivid image of that scene in the alley—of the darkness painted red and yellow by streaking guns and a leering, pug-nosed face illuminated for a brief moment of time. That face was the last thing he had remembered before the bullet which ploughed a furrow along his scalp dropped him into oblivion. It had continued to trouble him with its vague note of familiarity until now, as Harte's group caught up to Danver's party, the marshal suddenly placed that face even as its owner swung in the saddle to regard the rest of the posse. It was Si Norris.

Norris' eyes, sweeping Harte's men came to a pause as they rested on the marshal and moved quickly, nervously on. Harte gave no sign that he had recognized the deputy in the alley. Instinctively he had decided to play the game out, letting the sheriff take the lead. He was almost certain that Danver was on his way to meet Tallman

in order to get his share of the booty, and Harte intended to let the sheriff lead him to the gang's hide-out.

"Looks like the jasper gave us the slip again," blared Danver angrily as the augmented posse came to a halt atop a high bare knoll a quarter hour later. "I figure this is the way they would 'a' come, but we ain't seen side or hair o' them."

"Then we'll track 'em down," grated the wiry oldster who had been one of the men to find Harte in the alley. "It's time we put an end to Tallman's killin' an' thievin'. We kin split up in several parties an' comb the countryside. It's plenty light an' we oughta be able to spot any riders in the brush an' timber."

"That's a good idea," agreed the sheriff quickly with a sly grin.

Harte noted the grin and with a curious speculation tried to surprise some telltale expression on the bland face of Lou Meeker who sat a big mare beside Danver. But the banker's face was expressionless as was that of the bartender close beside him.

"I reckon Meeker here, an' Si Norris an' Wagner an' myself'll be enough for one party," the sheriff resumed oilily. "The rest o' you can split up as yuh please, but run the murderers down. If yuh meet up with 'em fire three shots an' we'll all come on the hop."

There were chorused shouts of approval and with a certain grim satisfaction, Harte noted how the veiled glances of Danver's close friends followed his movements, finally turning away when they saw him drift off with one group that headed due north. When a bend in the trail had carried Harte out of sight of Danver and his double-crossing crew, the marshal dropped to the rear, letting all the other riders in his section of the posse drift pass. At a signal from the man in the lead, the rider put their horses into a dead run through a long stretch of steep timber. Harte chose this moment to reverse his direction. He pushed the roan into the screening trees, padded slowly along for several hundred yards, then gave the roan its head.

IN A FEW moments he had gained the bare knoll again. Below him across a level flat stretch thinly spotted with timber, Harte saw Danver and the other riders. Grimly he put the roan on their trail. He rode swiftly but cannily, keeping in the shelter of screening brush and trees wherever possible. He did not let the roan run on the hard-packed trail, but kept the animal in the grass-carpeted ground alongside.

The sheriff and his men, followed at a safe distance by Harte, roared into the foothills, the land becoming cut by gullies, ravines and scattered canyons. Steep, brush-mantled slopes crowded the distant horizon and near at hand towering pinnacles of rock and sandstone thrust their rugged features close to the trail.

They climbed a long slant, then dropped down a grade and passed through a grassy meadow bisected by a splashing, silvery creek. Fording the creek at a shallow spot, the riders followed the creek along a narrow ledge which wound through a deep canyon, walled on three sides by sloping walls thickly covered with brush, vines and stunted jack pines. Dropping behind a dense thicket, Harte followed the line of that ledge with his eyes, seeing it terminate abruptly in a steep, rocky parapet over which plunged the swift-running creek in a gurgling, silver-laced falls.

The sheriff led his party to the edge of the shallow, whirling pool into which the falls emptied and gave a loud halloo. It was answered by another shout. The wide-shouldered figure of a man who had evidently been on guard, stepped out from behind a boulder. Moonlight glinted on a long rifle

cradled in the nook of his right arm. Moving through the dense brush, Harte drew up as close as he dared.

He waited while Danver and the rest rode their horses right through the falls and on beyond to what was no doubt a hidden cave. Quickly, Jeremy Harte vaulted from his hull. He ground-hobbled the roan, took the reata from the saddle, slinging it over his arm and started up the slope at his back. The guard had disappeared from view but Harte knew the man was somewhere about near the falls.

Clinging to bushes and the gnarled trunks of jack pines, he worked his way forward. Fortunately the chattering hiss of the creek water as it splashed over the cliff into the canyon, coupled with the thundering roar of the miniature rapids on the high parapet above the cave, drowned out any noise he might have made. At last, he reached a spot almost opposite the falls and more than a dozen feet above the guard whom he suddenly saw crouched in the lee of a huge boulder.

Harte swung the loop of his lasso deftly. He gave it a sharp flip and sent it arcing down toward the unsuspecting guard. There was only a slight, slurring sound and then the noose settled over the man's head. He started to cry out but the words died in his throat as Harte gave the reata a stiff jerk.

The noose contracted, making a taut band about the gent's windpipe. The Winchester slipped from his fingers and his hands went clawing desperately for the rope. Harte gave another tug at the rope that lifted the sentinel off his feet and left him squirming in the loose rubble and shale. The man kicked and fought, throwing out a pair of writhing arms whose gyration became slower and slower. At last his struggles ceased and he lay still.

Harte let up on the rope quickly, scrambled down the slope and loosed the tight band of the noose. He saw the man was not dead but completely out, his face choked and swollen. Then with the same rope, the marshal trussed up the sentinel, made a gag of his own bandanna and rolled the fellow into a thicket where he would be out of sight.

Peering carefully up and down the ledge to make sure none of Danver's party had come out of the cave again, Harte plunged into the shallow pool. The whirling water tugged at his knees, almost knocking him off his feet. With an effort he maintained his balance. His low-heeled boots crunched along the gravelly bed and spray dashed his face. He walked steadily toward the falls, ears tuned to any other disturbing sound.

HE WASN'T sure of what he was walking into, but he knew he had to make his bid to get these men. Counting Danver, there were four men in the sheriff's party. Then there would be Kit Tallman himself and possibly one or two others. Harte didn't figure there would be more than that because he himself had permanently disabled six of the lobo's gunslingers.

The full shock of the water hit Harte as he shouldered through the tumbling creek falls. Its coldness braced him and then suddenly he was behind that solid wall of water standing in shallows. Before him was the head-high opening of the cave and the reflected glow of a campfire somewhere around a bend in the yawning cavern.

Harte proceeded cautiously, striding out of the creek bed and pegging across the uneven slimy floor of the cave. Inside the gloom was like a solid thing. He had only the dim, ruddy glow of that distant campfire to guide him. Limestone drippings made the footing treacherous, and he moved slowly and cautiously so as to make no warning noise. Then in a narrow side corridor he caught the low whinny of

a horse almost lost in the roar of the falls behind him. Glancing toward the sound he saw a cavy of horses. Among them was a snow-white horse—Tallman's own stallion!

The corridor he was following curved sharply. Rounding the bend he saw the red glare of a fire in the rear of a dome-shaped rocky room. Loose bits of limestone rock were scattered all about and twice Harte stumbled and stopped, holding his breath lest he betray his presence. Slowly he moved forward, taking a concealed stand behind a wide pillar of rock. The aroused murmur of voices issuing from the men about the fire came clearly to him. In that group were Danver, Meeker, the bartender, Si Norris, Tallman himself, and another heavily bearded man.

Danver tossed a pine knot on the fire, watched the flames lick at it in sputtering glee and faced the outlaw leader with a smile.

"Well, Kit, I reckon we pulled that gold deal kinda slick. Only next time don't swing that gun butt o' yores so hard. Yuh near cooked my goose for good."

Tallman, well-named, for he was a towering hulk of a man, deep and hairy-chested with long arms and big hands, gave the sheriff a crooked grin in return. His gray-green eyes set close to his broad, flat nose darted quickly over the men hunkered about the fire.

"You shore nobody followed yuh up here?" he asked in a sharp, nasal voice.

"Plumb positive," replied the sheriff. "The rest o' the posse split up an' they'll hunt till dawn through the timber along Mountain Ridge an' never find a thing except mebbe a prairie dog hole."

Lou Meeker, his bland face ruddy and pleased, broke in: "I wonder what the folks in town'd do if they knew I was in on robbin' my own bank," the banker remarked gloatingly.

"They'd hang you like yuh deserve," snapped Tallman harshly.

The banker's face pinched in with fear and his eyes dilated. "What do yuh m-mean?" he stammered, his thin, wiry figure making an ineffectual shape in the group.

"Nothin'," said Tallman with a grin. "Only you're lucky I'm cuttin' yuh in on the deal with the rest." His eyes turned bright and cold and his lips thinned out. "Fact is, I ought 'a' salivate yuh. . ." he turned quickly on Danver "an' you, too, gummin' up the works with that fool marshal."

A stricken look haunted Danver's face and a nervous pulse throbbed in the curve of his throat. He shifted uneasily, his eyes barely meeting Tallman's gaze.

"I did my best," husked Danver.

"Yeah? Well, it wasn't good enough. When yuh told me you'd gotten word that this Harte jigger was on his way, I told yuh to waylay him an' sent six o' the boys to help you. An' what happened? When Len Bixby pulled his sneak an' I was all set to get the gold along comes this snoopin' marshal an' I had to beat it. Instead o' bein' with the boys, yuh left 'em to handle Harte alone an' he mussed up the whole shebang for keeps.

"HE DID THE same in town, an' you expect me to be thankful just 'cause yuh sent Si here to tell me the money was in yore safe." Tallman's dark brows drew together in his small forehead and he went on, more high-tempered. "An' now Si tells me him an' two o' the boys couldn't down this Harte jigger in an alley. How the hell do I know Harte ain't stickin' his noggin around here this minute. I ask yuh, How do I know?"

"That's just it, Tallman! Yuh *don't* know!"

Harte had stepped from behind the limestone pillar and suddenly confronted the unsuspecting group of men

around the fire. In the half gloom Tallman and Danver and the rest couldn't tell for sure who he was, for their eyes were dimmed by the glare from the flames.

"It's him! Harte!" shouted Danver, livid fear suddenly thawing out the harsh, unpleasant lines of his face.

"Your memory is servin' yuh well," the marshal observed dryly.

He stood there, his slate-gray eyes darting from one to the other with a narrow, steady inspection. His guns were in the flapless holsters thonged low at his thighs, and he waited while scheming speculation gleamed in the eyes of these men.

Although he might have drawn his guns on them, Harte knew that someone in the crowd, encouraged by the immensity of the odds against himself, would go fanning for his gun. That being so, it was the marshal's code to give them all a fair break. His sober mind told him it was foolhardy, but for him there was no other way.

Lou Meeker's quivering voice beat out: "Well, Ed, what're yuh waitin' for?"

Harte smiled grimly. The banker, too cowardly to go for his own weapon, was prodding the sheriff to unsheath his.

"Shore, Danver, why don't yuh go for yore hogleg?" inquired Harte thinly, a twist of his lip corners putting an expression of irony there. "Or how about you, Tallman? Or mebbe you'd rather hightail it like yuh did this mornin' after yuh drygulched Bixby?"

Harte could see Tallman's face darken as anger had its way with the man, and he knew the break was only seconds away. It had to come. He couldn't expect to keep these six desperate men at bay while he waited for help that might never come to this hidden spot.

"What's the matter, Si?" demanded the bartender harshly.

"Danver, yuh damn fool! Drill him!" shrilled the banker.

Harte laughed harshly and pegged forward.

"I reckon you gents are aimin' to come along back to Clinton right peaceable so I'll..."

His right foot striking a slimy pocket along the floor of the cave, Harte was thrown off balance for a moment. Even as he regained his footing he saw the outlaws with one accord go clawing for their six-guns. With the smooth oily speed of a striking cobra, both of the marshal's hands whipped down to the flapless holsters at his hips. His big frame went into a crouch. His elbows crooked, while sinewy fingers curled around stocks of gleaming Colts.

The men in front were rolling away from the fire, dragging out their guns, but Harte had his weapons out so fast that his motions were lost in a blinding blur of speed. All that Danver and Meeker ever remembered was the crouched and deadly figure of Harte with grim eyes peering behind the apex of twin poles of flame. Both of the marshal's .45s erupted in a blighting spray. The roar of them filled the cavern with a deafening concussion that was repeated and grew in volume with each succeeding shot.

DANVER and Meeker never got their guns clear of leather as they wilted under the jarring impact of lead slugs in their hearts. The bearded outlaw beside Kit Tallman threw a wild shot that ricocheted off the cavern ceiling, sending a limestone shower to the floor, and collapsed with a slug through his throat. On the heels of the bearded gent fell Si Norris, a death rattle gushing past his writhing lips.

Slipping and side-stepping as his heaving guns catapulted heavy-calibred bullets from their round black bores, Harte squeezed off shots that would have amazed any onlooker. A changeless expression on his rugged features,

he watched those shots take their fateful toll.

The bartender managed to rip out two hasty shots without effect. Like the silent rush of wind, the hot lead of those shots zipped past Harte's head. Then, he was notching his sights on the bartender and thumbing his hammers. The latter dropped like a sack of meal while Tallman, mounting lurid curses, poured a hail of lead at the dancing figure of the marshal.

A squalling bullet clattered against Harte's left-hand gun, bounding from it and skidding up the length of his arm. The marshal dropped the weapon, then pitched to his knees as he slipped on the slimy floor. Instinctively trying to stop his fall, he dropped the other gun as Tallman came toward him, both .45s leveled.

"I reckon this is one time yuh rated yoreself too high, Harte. Six-to-one odds are even too big for you."

Jeremy Harte regarded him coolly, his face immobile, eyes scornful.

"So?" he said.

"So I'm goin' to fasten yore belt with lead. I owe it to you, for buttin' in where yuh wasn't invited."

"Feelin' kinda brave now, aren't yuh, now that you've got the drop? Think yuh'll have the guts to kill me an' get away?"

"What makes yuh think I haven't?" blared Tallman, his eyes flaming viciously.

"This!" snapped Harte, and hurled a jagged hunk of loose limestone straight at the outlaw.

Tallman tried to duck the missile even as he squeezed the triggers, but the rock struck him high, directly above the ear, stunning him. Harte lunged to his feet and threw himself at the lobo's knees as a brace of bullets drummed over his head. Tallman's legs buckled and he staggered backwards, hitting the floor of the cave with a terrific crash. Afterwards, his head rolled at a grotesque angle, and a pool of crimson began to spread out beneath him in a widening sea.

Jeremy Harte got up, his face ashen and worn, showing the strain he had been through. His irregular features carried their same lonely, somber expression, and if there was any relief in his slate-gray eyes it was a bleak relief, hidden by reserve and fatigue.

He hadn't wanted to kill Tallman. He always preferred to bring his victims in to trial. But it had been a case of Tallman or himself. And so the marshal had his last gray look at the interior cave, before retrieving the gold-filled saddlebags, then turned toward the roar of the falls.

In the morning the mess would have to be cleaned up. Then the same old cycle would start again—the cycle of lonely trails and grim owl-hoot bands, and the relentless hunting that was the code of U. S. marshals.

Outside in the night air again with the wind fresh and crisp off distant peaks, and the chatter of the plunging water ringing merrily in his ears. Jeremy Harte could find a quiet smile for the broken land and a fresh eagerness for the new and twisted trails that lay ahead of him.

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WESTERN ACTION

THE PRIVATE BATTLE OF JOE BLACKCHIEF

by M. Michael Sims

When she found out what he was, this girl would no longer be interested in him, Joe knew.

JOE BLACKCHIEF sniffed the hot, sun-baked air as he limped through the loose dust of Yarrow Flats Main Street. Somewhere a towhee called—a brown tone from a brown throat—and Joe listened while he watched a pretty girl swinging a market basket on her arm. It was a lazy day. He could almost forget his hatred for a world that had left him crippled, and branded him halfbreed. It was not a day to murder the parson.

Of course the parson was nothing to Joe—just a little man who preached too loudly on Sunday morning so that you could hear him all the way across the street in *Beak's Saloon*. And Joe Blackchief had no qualms about being an outlaw; to him, this was justice, the proverbial eye for an eye, like the many notches in his gun. But the coming notch would be the first mark of cold blood, the first killing for pay.

The parson knew too much about the Wentworth gang and hadn't the brains to keep his mouth shut. Joe told himself that such stupidity deserved a bullet—but even so he could not deny the feeling of uneasiness that crept all through him, clear down to his holster, making his gun hang extra heavy.

He tried not to think of the killing now, training his thoughts on the girl whose blonde hair was bobbing jauntily on her shoulders.

"Howdy," he said, tipping his hat when they met. It was the polite thing to do in Yarrow Flats, but it took an unusual amount of boldness for Joe. He wouldn't have spoken at all if he hadn't been trying so hard to forget the killing.

The look of the halfbreed was strong across Joe's high cheekbones; and there was the limp. Too often chilled by uptilted noses and looks of disdain, Joe had long-since abolished friendly howdies on small town main streets.

"Well, hello," said the girl. It was a friendly greeting, so like the sunny day and the warm sky, the surprise was too much for Joe. He stopped in his tracks.

"What's the matter?" asked the girl. "You did say hello didn't you?"

"Why—er—yes," said Joe, "But you spoke as if you know me and... I'm surprised; that's all."

"Well," laughed the girl, "Pa says there's no such thing as a stranger, and I agree! Who ever knew a stranger on such a pretty day as this?"

"I reckon you're right," said Joe; "and if we aren't strangers, do you suppose I could know your name?"

Joe Blackchief was cold steel before another man, dead shot behind a trigger, but this much boldness toward a little mite of a girl left his knees shaking.

"Why, of course," she replied, her white teeth flashing like polished pearls. It was just as if she hadn't noticed his limp or the give-away cheek bones. "Cholla. Cholla Moffet; that's me."

THE NAME *Moffet* struck Joe's listening ears like a blow on the head. "The parson's daughter?" he whispered, afraid of her answer.

"One and the same," she said proudly.

Somehow he managed to tip his hat and say 'good day', but he knew that his shock was conspicuous, knew that she was watching him as he limped away.

The morning lost its gentle, lazy air; it seemed heavy with urgency. He tried to get his mind off Cholla, to get it on to business again. But killing the parson was business, and Joe couldn't think of the parson without thinking of Moffet's daughter. He remembered how her hair had matched the market basket, straw-yellow and soft on her shoulders, as sunny as her face.

He tried to walk off his uneasiness. He saw the aimless figures of cowmen in doorways—men searching for a way to spend the Saturday. He walked past Tate's general store, where ladies exclaimed over bright bolts of material, and picked out the right spools of thread. Did Cholla sew, he wondered.

In desperation he walked into *Beak's Saloon,* trying to ignore the fact that only a few yards of yellow dust separated it from the little church where the parson would be preaching in the morning—if it weren't for the fact that he was going to be killed tonight.

Behind the bar, Zack stood coiling his mustache. Zack had no qualms about serving alcohol to an Indian. If an Indian's coin was a true to the bite, whiskey was his.

"Something Joe?" he asked, not moving, still twirling the long mustache.

"A double shot," Joe murmured, placing his lame foot on the bar rail.

There was an audible murmur down at the end of the bar where three members of the Wentworth gang—Nat Casey, Shorty Molton, and Chester Hagen bent over their drinks in a dense cloud of cigaret smoke.

"Howdy Joe," said one of them at last.

It was Chester Hagen—a big, burly fellow with a week's growth of beard, and cold beady eyes under thick brows. He picked up his drink and sauntered slowly toward Joe Blackchief.

Zack gave his mustache one more twirl for good measure and then busied himself knowingly.

"How's every little thing?" Hagen asked in his unctious voice. His breath smelled of an admixture of garlic and nicotine.

"Fine," said Joe shortly.

"Still going to pull the deal tonight?"

"I reckon," said Joe.

"The boss usually picks me for that sort of thing," Hagen said, staring down at his grimy fingernails.

"If you're thinking I asked for the job, you're wrong."

"That so?" asked Hagen, his small eyes beadier under the furrowed brows.

"Yes," Joe said, "I'm a gunman when need be, but I'm not a professional killer."

"So?"

"So I didn't ask for the job!" Joe snapped, slamming the glass down on the bar. "If you want to take the matter up with Wentworth, do it!"

JOE LOOKED away. His fists were clenched and itching to plant themselves in the blubber of Hagen's face; he had worked with these men for several months, but there was no comradeship. They had never been friends.

It's as if I've never really wanted to be an outlaw, Joe Blackchief thought—as if someone had been standing behind me all the time with a gun in my back, forcing me to work with these men.

"If you'd really as soon I do the killing," went on Hagen, "Why ain't you said so? Why ain't you gone to Wentworth and suggested I do it instead? He wouldn't be surprised none. After all, the bloody end has always been my job."

Joe stared into the great red face. Actually he had never considered such a move: If Wentworth was his boss, it stood to reason he should follow the boss' orders. Yet what Chester Hagen said was true. Wentworth would think nothing of Joe if he suggested a switch in gunmen; there were plenty of fellows like him who preferred not to kill on hire.

"Why ain't you answering?" asked Hagen, still digging underneath his soiled nails. "You want to put me out of my job, don't you—so's you can prove you're big and brave, even if you are a crippled halfbreed."

The same old business, the same open wound—this judging a man by a limp and a cheekbone. Joe Blackchief felt his Indian blood roiling in his veins as his fists clenched and unclenched again and again. He had a rule he lived by: not to come to blows with the men he worked with; and yet...

"Hagen," he said, "you got no call to goad me! There's things I could say about you too, you know."

"Yeah! Like what?" snarled Hagen, fire shooting from the small porcine eyes.

"Like you're a blood-sucking parasite. Like you love to kill the way some men love to have a woman, or like some men love to drink. You live to kill, you filthy swine!"

"You can't talk to me like that," Hagen blubbered. Then, like a snorting bull he was upon Joe, his ham-sized fists flying for Joe's dark face.

There was one moment when Joe couldn't see through the film of blood over his eyes, but the moment was short; then he was proving the rumor men spoke about him, that no one could beat Blackchief down. It was Chester Hagen who lay sprawled on his back a moment later, wiping his bloody mouth with one bruised fist.

Joe stood over him, his slim legs outspread, and looked down the bar at the other Wentworth men.

"Anyone else?" he asked.

They shifted their feet uneasily and gazed into their empty glasses.

"All right then," Joe murmured, "You fellows go to Wentworth and tell him what happened. You tell him I'm not going to do the killing. Chester wants it, so Chester is the man! Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," one of them murmured, "Anything you say, Joe. Wentworth will understand."

THAT WAS the beautiful thing about it, Joe thought, as he stepped over Hagen and walked away. Wentworth wouldn't mind a bit. He'd never know how secretly thankful for that fight with Hagen Joe Blackchief

was. It was like a reprieve, a passport to friendship with Cholla Moffet. He found his heart fairly singing because he wouldn't have to kill the parson after all.

When he stepped out into the sunny street again, mopping the blood from a cut on his forehead, it seemed almost natural to see Cholla standing before him in the dusty road. Behind her was the shabby little church, sorely in need of paint, its one shattered stained-glass window catching a ray of sunlight on its rim. He thought how much like the church Cholla was—plain and poor, but sunny and inviting nonetheless.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you again!" she cried. "I took the groceries home and turned right around back toward town to find you."

"To find me?" he echoed dully, his hand with the blood soaked handkerchief dropping away from his face.

"Oh," Cholla cried, "what have you done to your face?"

"Oh, never mind that—just a scratch—but what I want to know is why were you looking for me? I don't understand."

"Well," said Cholla, casting her eyes down to the road in her first sign of shyness, "I liked you— I mean, you looked to me like someone sort of... well, misunderstood and lonely I guess. Like the way you were so surprised when I spoke in a friendly way to you."

"Oh," murmured Joe. It was the only word he could think to say.

"I think you must be fairly new in town," Cholla went on, "And I thought it would be nice to make friends. There's going to be a church social next week, a big pot luck dinner and ...well, I thought maybe we could go together. Everyone pairs off, and it would be nice if..."

"Stop, Cholla!" cried Joe. All the happy thoughts left him, all the light feeling of reprieve; his shoulders were laden suddenly with the thought of where he really stood, and what he really was; the outlaw being asked to a church social by an unsuspecting girl.

She looked hurt, biting her lower lip with the even snowy teeth. "But why?" she asked softly.

"MY NAME is Joe Blackchief," he said slowly. "I'm new in town, all right but you've probably heard of me. If you haven't, it's time you do."

"I don't understand."

"I'm an Indian," he said, "and a cripple."

"Heavens," said Cholla, still smiling, "who objects to you being an Indian? And there's every kind of a cripple, you know. A man crippled inside if far worse than one just crippled on the outside."

"All right then, have it your way," cried Joe. "I'm the worse kind then; lame inside and out! If you haven't heard of Joe Blackchief than maybe you've heard of my boss—Henny Wentworth. How about that?"

"Yes," she said weakly, "who hasn't heard of Wentworth? He hides behind his fancy office and terrorizes all of Yarrow Flats. Everybody knows it, but nobody proves it. Nobody even tries."

"Someone is going to try," Joe said softly.

"You know about Dad?" she asked, looking up into his eyes with a searching glance that tore at his heart. He couldn't take it another minute. The heart was under his ribs, under his collar. He had to walk away.

"Joe," she cried, following close behind, tugging at his sleeve, "Dad's got an appointment to talk to Wentworth tonight. They're not going to hurt him, are they? You wouldn't let them! If they are you've got to stop them!"

"I can' turn the tide!" he said; "I can't change the season. I couldn't calm a killer if I tried. Besides Cholla, face the facts; I'm one of them!" He

turned quickly and limped away, leaving her standing in the middle of the room, her small gloved hands at her side.

Once more, he tried to walk off his anguish; but his lame foot grew as tired as his swimming head. Finally he took himself up to the barreness of the four walls of his hotel room to count the long hours until eight, the hour set for the parson's death.

After a time, he began to pace the floor. At the window, he could gaze down into the dusty street where Cholla had walked such a short time before. He could see the swinging doors of Beak's Saloon, the still doors of the little church. He could see the big clock in front of the General Store. Four o'clock. Five o'clock. Six o'clock. The long hours ticked by, until there were only thirty minutes left until eight. He could envisage a picture of Chester Hagen shaving off his beard, bandaging up his cuts, combing his hair—dressing up for death.

Joe told himself firmly that he would be a fool to intervene. He was what he was—a hardened outlaw, a man with a gun. The parson was a stupid little blabbermouth; and should Joe Blackchief risk his life to be his brother's keeper? It wasn't as if he could ever hope to win a girl like Cholla. The parson dead or alive, it could make no difference in his chances with her. Now that she knew what he was, she was as out of his reach as the big dipper in the evening skies. So why should he care if the parson lived or died?

HE SAW THE door of the little church open wide as he looked down upon the moonlit street. The old man stepped out on the small cement steps. His bald head shown in the night. In his hand he held a small bible, pressed tightly so that Joe knew that he had been praying.

Then Cholla stepped out of the church too, her lips pleading. Joe knew what she was saying, even though he could not hear; she would be begging him not to go out on the streets alone. She would be asking that he stay in his room, that he give up the idea of his appointment with Wentworth or the idea of his Sunday sermon—the one he had planned to set the town of Yarro Flats into action.

But the old man shook his head. He smiled wanly and patted his daughter's hand. And then, with quick almost bird-like movements he left her by the door, stepped into the yellow dust that rose in little puffs under foot like small explosions.

Just as quickly Joe found himself buckling his holster, the gun heavy on his slim hip.

After all, it wasn't just Cholla who mattered. There were other things. There was the matter of a brave little man with a bald head; there was a matter of something called justice. When he came down to it, there was the matter of the whole town of Yarrow Flats, and the wide world where it sat.

For the first time in his life Joe Blackchief felt as if he was doing what he really wanted to do. Everything else had been wrong, being an outlaw included. The shoe had never fit—not even on the lame foot.

In the street, he found himself showered in moonlight. Before him was the little parson, walking along whistling the tune of some old hymn. Out of the shadows stepped Chester Hagen. Somewhere behind Hagen was Casey.

There was the sound of footfall, a heavy sound; it had to belong to Hagen.

"Chester," Joe rasped, "Show yourself."

"What the hell you want, half-breed?" whispered the big man. He stepped slowly out of the shadows.

"I think you should forget killing the old man," Joe whispered in reply. The sound of the parson's whistling

was growing louder. The old fool was coming on ahead, even though he was bound to see the dark figures before him.

"Wentworth is playing you for a sucker," Joe said quickly. "Don't you see, Chester? You're his pawn; you commit his murders. Someday you get caught, and who pays? Why you, of course, while Wentworth sits at his desk smoking long cigars. Is that right?"

"So what should I do?" asked Hagen slowly.

JUST LEAVE the parson alone. After all, he's a harmless little man. How could he hurt a man like Wentworth? Just say you changed your mind. Wentworth won't be hard on you; he needs you too badly. Why, he couldn't carry on if you and Casey left him."

"And we ain't gonna leave him," said Hagen. "This killing is mine, and I'm getting paid good for it. I ain't giving it up for no crippled half-breed. Stay clear of me!"

Joe bit his lip. "I'm right behind you."

"And I'm right behind *you!*" called Casey. "I've got you covered, Blackchief, so you'd better keep your nose clean!"

Joe felt his heart somewhere in his throat, his finger itching above his holster.

Down the middle of the road came the parson, still whistling head-on toward death.

"Don't come further, Parson!" Joe Blackchief shouted suddenly, his sharp voice piercing the night air.

Chester Hagen swore, turned, and drew; but Joe saw the movement and drew a little faster; and it was the big man who went spinning to plop heavily on the warm earth. From behind, from Casey's gun came the shot Joe had expected, the one that found its way agonizingly into his back. He felt the life draining out of him, but at the same time he was surcharged with some glorious feeling of being on the right side of the law, behind the right trigger.

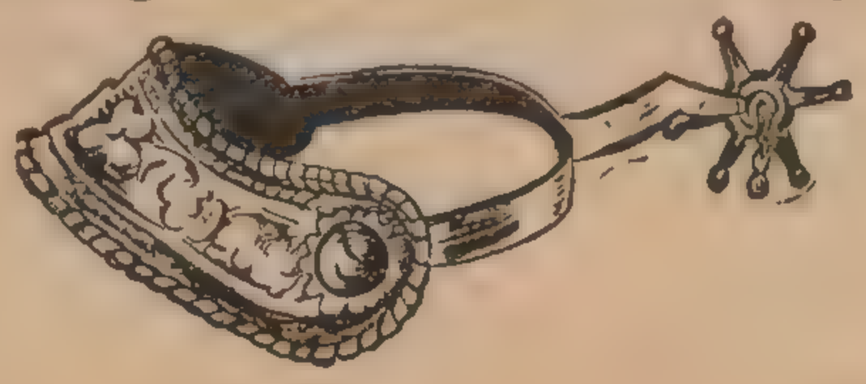
He couldn't give up now, when the old parson was still on his feet. He summoned back the life with a courage he'd never known before, not even in the gunfights of old that put the notches in his gun. This was something greater.

Joe Blackchief spun on his weakened legs and pulled the trigger again, this time to send a bullet through Casey, as another from Casey's gun struck him. But before he fell he was able to see some things that would make death easier: Casey dead before his eyes; Cholla running toward her father with her blonde hair billowing behind her; the parson standing, as alive as ever, the Bible still pressed in his hands. Joe Blackchief fell with a smile on his lips.

It was hard for him to realize as he opened his eyes to the fog of hot soup and smiling faces that he hadn't died, and just gone off to heaven. He saw the doctor's face but did not believe. He felt the bandages tight around his body but he was still dubious. Until he looked into the eyes of Cholla and heard the music of her voice he was unwilling to admit that Joe Blackchief still lived.

"I believe he's going to pull through," said the doctor thoughtfully. "But it won't be easy; he'll need a lot of nursing."

"I'll take care of him," said Cholla softly. "Always."



THE AFFAIR AT YOUNG'S SALOON

by Edward Garner

The pig-like eyes of Vulture Beale,
A gnome-like, squat gun-slick,
Proclaimed their pleasure with the rye,
Above a pear-shaped *hic;*
It pleasured him plumb wonderful
That his glass had such kick.

The aromatic scent of rye
Rode on each *hic* he gave;
From each belch, pleasure's banners could
Almost be seen to wave;
With each drink, standards of content
Were hoisted for the knave!

He sat in Two-Faced Young's Saloon,
A pilgrim who was stewed;
He looked at Two-Faced, and began
To cogitate and brood;
He drained his glass that Two-Faced might
In more rye's light be viewed!

The Vulture slowly shook his head,
That saloon crowd among;
And at that moment he recalled
A certain forked tongue,
Belonging to a gent nearby—
That gent was Two-Faced Young!

The Vulture pondered on his facts,
And marched them to and fro,
Surveying them from angles that
Did not increase their glow,
Appraising them with the fine glass
Of rye's continued flow!

The Vulture, on unsteady feet,
Arose to make things right,
To rid Young of the forked tongue,
And the two faces' blight,
By sending him to hell at once,
With a Colt to chart his flight!

Two shots rang out; there was no doubt
Two gents had bit the dust,
And one of them was Two-Faced Young,
Who would make hell or bust,
While the other gent was Vulture Beale—
Some thought he'd reach hell fust!

Special Feature

TOMBSTONE NO GHOST TOWN

by H. C. Ingraham

THIS YEAR, I spent my vacation in Tombstone, Arizona, a community rich in the legend of the old west. It is no ghost town.

If you ask what happened to Wyatt Earp's tombstone, the silence is as deafening as it is in famed old Boot Hill Cemetery.

It may be logical for some folks to assume that the granite marker, stolen recently from a cemetery at Colma, California, just south of San Francisco, was destined for Tombstone. But you won't get anyone around there to admit as much. In fact, says Clayton Smith, editor of the *Tombstone Epitaph:* "Earp's ghost probably would clobber anybody who tried to return his ashes or his marker to Tombstone."

Adds Smith, who is balding, is untanned and does not wear Western clothes, "Why should he want to return here? He was a bitter man when he left. One of his brothers had been killed, and another bushwhacked. Earp himself had been indicted for murder of the man accused of killing his brother."

Mayor Sid Wilson laughs off the idea that anyone would bring the Earp marker to Tombstone. A search of Boot Hill Cemetery, where many a gunman was taken after being a mite slow on the draw, reveals no sign of the missing marker.

The Epitaph notes that Tombstone Restoration, Inc., a citizens' group seeking to preserve the famous frontier town's relics, recently dropped plans to return Earp's remains to the town where his gun was once the only law.

Since the 1880's, the weekly *Epitaph* has been telling the story of Tombstone. In the days when the population was nearly 10,000—compared with today's 1,800—the boast was first heard that the town was "too tough to die."

Earp was a deputy U. S. marshal, and it took a hard man to keep the peace when droves of miners, cowboys and gunmen—thirsty for booze and blondes—came to town for some fun. Everyone agrees Earp was a hard man.

Near the entrance to Boot Hill Cemetery stands Tombstone's most famous

relic, a large stone monument over the graves of Tom and Frank McLowery and Billy Clanton. They were shot down in the famed gunfight at the O. K. Corral October 26, 1881, by Earp, his brothers Morgan and Virgil and the guntoting dentist, Doc Holliday.

To this day, descendants of the McLowerys and Clanton claim their forebearers were ambushed and killed because they knew too much of Earp's allegedly-illegal activities. But Editor Smith, who has the only authentic newspaper files, says, "If there was a bad egg on Earp's side, it was Doc Holliday. He came from a good Southern family, but all he ever did was drink and look for fights. By the way, he never practiced dentistry in Tombstone.

"Sure Earp chummed around with Holliday, because Holliday knew everybody in the red-light district and had information that Earp needed."

But Smith sadly admits that no one will ever be sure of the rights or wrongs of the famed gunfight. And if you ask each of Tombstone's residents you will probably get 1,800 different versions.

Even Boot Hill's tombstones stir the flames of controversy. When former President Truman announced his retirement in April, 1952, he referred to an epitaph he said was on a Boot Hill grave: "Here lies Jack Williams. He done his damndest."

Wally Foster, who was Mayor of Tombstone at that time, promptly denied there was such a headboard in Boot Hill. Truman countered with a charge of publicity-seeking. The argument never was settled; and apparently, no one ever attempted to find out just what Jack Williams did his damndest about.

BUT TO THE delight of tourists, the cemetery does abound in some noncontroversially colorful epitaphs, including:

"Marguerita. Stabbed in the *Gold Dollar*."

"George Johnson. Hanged by mistake."

"Here lies Lester Moore,
Four slugs from a 44.
No Les. No more."

Several tombstones bear the notation: "Hanged legally." In those days a "legal hanging" was a sign of civic stability.

Boot Hill, incidentally, got its name from a frontier superstition. Most Easterners, says *Epitaph* editor Smith, think that death with boots on was an honor; actually it was a disgrace because it indicated the deceased was outdrawn.

The cemetery is only a short walk from Tombstone's downtown section. Here, on historic Allen street, a pizza restaurant offers its wares to the tourist, and no one's sense of historical authenticity is outraged.

Just a few yards from the pizzeria, gunman Roger King shot and killed Johnny Wilson—to prove the straight draw was faster than the cross draw. There Buckskin Frank Leslie once stood his wife against a wall and used a .45 to shoot a silhouette around her. And in a nearby bar, Johnny Ringo shot down Louis Hancock after an argument over the merits of beer and whiskey.

Down Allen street one day in the 1880's Waco Bill strode drunkenly, demanding to confront the marshal. He was shot down by a stranger in the middle of the street. As Waco Bill breathed his last, the stranger bent over him, courteously tipped his hat and said: "I, sir, am Marshal Duffield."

A few yards away, is the spot where outraged citizens hanged John Heath from a telegraph pole for his part in the Bisbee robbery, in which five citizens died. After the lynching, a coroner's jury ruled Heath died of "emphysema of the lungs—a disease common in high altitude—which might have

been caused by strangulation, self-inflicted or otherwise."

Facts or legend—no one in Tombstone will ever stop telling the old tales.

And a few blocks away lives a woman who recalls meeting Earp in Colorado, when she was "very young," after he left Tombstone under a cloud of suspicion.

"Yes, he did look a bit like TV actor, Hugh O'Brien," says Mrs. J. H. Macia, 76 year old widow of a Cochise County mining man.

"He was a fine man, and a lot of wonderful people believed in him, then and now. Earp was a gentleman. He was not coarse, but he had to be strong to keep Tombstone from being overrun."

Mrs. Macia has no patience with some of the historical inaccuracies which she says are still current.

"Decent citizens always were safe in Tombstone; of course, if someone came to town looking for trouble, he would find it."

Mrs. Macia recalls that the Rev. Endicott Peabody supported Earp in the feud with the McLowerys and Clantons. Peabody, who was pastor of Tombstone's St. Paul Episcopal church, which still stands, later headed east and founded the now famous Groton school.

Mrs. Macia, who plays an active part in Tombstone's restoration activities, has long since stopped trying to refute the apocryphal stories, which have become more fantastic over the years. But there is one thing she—and the rest of Tombstone—insist upon:

Don't ever call it a ghost town, podner. Because the town has some of the liveliest spirits this side of tarnation.

And it's a wonderful place to spend a vacation!

———— ★ ————

A "New Look" on the Old West

The new April issue features two thrilling novelets. (1) RIPE FOR THE ROPE by E. E. Clement tells of a man, unjustly imprisoned upon the false testimony of a supposed friend and partner, who found that the only way he could remain free after his escape was to rod the very law who sought him. (2) SAVIOURS FROM SANPETE by Roe Richmond is a story of the days when wagon-trains of emigrants crossed the continent under the constant threat of attack by Indians and white renegades. But this particular wagon-train could not, like most, expect any help from honest men; these were the hated Mormons. In the fact department, we have an account of the old days by Pete Carter; LOOKING INTO THE PAST relates a sequence of experiences Pete and a friend underwent in the days of his youth when they were "drifting cowpokes".

This issue is now on sale at all stands; don't miss it!

You'll find these, and other outstanding features and stories, in the April 1958

FAMOUS WESTERN

THE BEST IN FACT AND FICTION

NIGHT RAID

by Edwin Booth

The situation with the nesters was explosive enough without a h o t h e a d e d trouble-maker ready to touch it off!

FOR THREE days and nights the hot New Mexico wind had blown without letup, sucking the last drop of moisture out of the grass, and grinding men's tempers to a thin edge. Tonight as Johnny Harding tied his big claybank at the C-Bar-C hitchrail, the gale seemed to have reached a new ferocity, and the moon was barely able to penetrate the thick swirl of dust which made the ranch buildings appear weird and unnatural.

As Johnny ducked under the rail and put his shoulder into the wind, it crossed his mind that this was his first visit to this house as an outsider. It was a disturbing thought, and he was frowning as he waited for an answer to his knock.

Light footsteps sounded inside the house, and Virginia herself opened the door, looking more desirable than ever with the wind wrapping her thin dress around her softly curved body. She hesitated only a second, then pulled the door wide and held out her hand. "Johnny," she said warmly. "This *is* a surprise."

The touch of her hand thrilled him as it always did, and he held it while he closed the door behind him, forgetting for the moment that his visit here tonight might change things between the two of them. He released her hand then, and said with his usual directness. "I came to see Cleve, Virginia. Is he home?"

"Oh—you want Dad." There was a new inflection to her voice, but when she turned, she seemed perfectly composed. "Of course, Johnny. He's in the sitting room talking to Dutch Kroeger about tomorrow's roundup." She hesitated a moment, then added soberly, "If you're here about the homesteaders, don't start trouble, will you?"

Johnny grinned wryly. "*Me* start trouble, Virginia? You know better than that."

She nodded without smiling. "I guess

I do, Johnny. I'm sorry." She turned and led him into the big oak-beamed sitting room.

Dutch Kroeger, a thick, bullet-headed man, was facing the doorway, and he frowned as he saw who the visitor was. He and Johnny had never seen eye-to-eye, even when Johnny had been Cleve Carlton's foreman, and it was not surprising that there was less cordiality between them now. Nevertheless, Johnny smiled at him pleasantly and said, "Howdy, Dutch."

Kroeger didn't answer, but Johnny's voice brought Cleve out of his chair and turned him toward the door. "Well," he said. "Johnny Harding." He moved across the room and held out his hand, although he didn't make a pretense of being overjoyed. This was as Johnny had expected it to be. Cleve Carlton had many good qualities, and one of them was complete honesty. Johnny admired him for it, even as he regretted that Cleve no longer considered him a friend.

"Hello, Cleve." Johnny took the rancher's hand, noticing with regret that Cleve's fingers had lost some of their strength. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Cleve turned to glance briefly at Dutch Kroeger before shaking his shaggy head. "Nothing that can't wait, I reckon." He motioned toward a chair. "Have a seat, Johnny." He lifted his eyes toward Virginia, who was watching thoughtfully from just inside the doorway. "Bring that bottle from the dining room, girl. Likely we all need something to cut this dust." He turned toward Johnny. "All right with you?"

Johnny started to refuse, then saw Virginia watching him, and realized that she wanted this meeting kept on a friendly basis, so he nodded.

"Dutch?" Cleve turned toward the other rancher, who so far hadn't spoken.

"No," Dutch said, looking at Johnny. It was the first time Johnny had known Dutch to refuse a drink, and there was no mistaking the reason, but he controlled his temper. Unless he could master his own emotions, he couldn't very well ask as much of anyone else.

CLEVE FROWNED at Dutch for a moment, then shrugged his heavy shoulders and turned to look at Johnny. "All right, boy," he said. Cleve always referred to Johnny as a boy, in spite of his twenty-six years. "I reckon you might as well get on with it. You're likely here about the homesteaders, and that's Kroeger's concern as much as it is mine." He said "homesteaders" as though the word tasted bad, and Johnny knew what he had suspected from the first, that this visit was a waste of time. Still, he had to try.

"You're right, Cleve; it's about the settlers. More particularly, about the waterhole." He got to his feet, and automatically shifted his holstered gun to a more comfortable position. "You're a fair man, Cleve, and I'm hoping..."

"That I'll call off my guards and let the nesters water their cows?" Cleve's voice showed how close he was to exploding. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Johnny. I'll see every damned cow dead before I'll let 'em taste that water!"

Johnny had feared something like this and was braced for it, having made up his mind to handle this peacefully. Unfortunately, Dutch Kroeger chose this moment to say beligerently, "I'll go farther than that, Harding. I'll *shoot* their mangy critters if I have to. You can go back and tell your thieving friends I said so."

Something snapped, and Johnny couldn't hold himself in check. He crossed the room in two strides and grabbed the front of Kroeger's shirt in his left fist. "You do that, Dutch, and you'll have me to deal with! Those

men have as much right to the water as you have, and if there's any thieving around here it's you high-and-mighty range hogs!"

Kroeger started to wrench at Johnny's wrist, but apparently something he saw in Johnny's eyes changed his mind, and he looked uneasily at Cleve. Seeing this, Johnny loosed his grip on Kroeger's shirt and turned stiffly to face the rancher, who was frowning at him.

"I'm sorry, Cleve." Johnny knew it was useless now, but he thought about the homesteaders and went on anyway. "I didn't aim to blow up, but there's just so much a man..." He threw up his hands. "Damn it, Cleve—you know I'm not lying about the water."

Cleve set his jaw stubbornly. "I know a lot of things, Johnny. A lot of things you seem to have forgotten. I know it was me, and others like me, who drove our herds across the Red and settled this country. We fought for what we've got, and we ain't likely to let a bunch of land-grabbers come in and take it away from us." He shook his head. "Confound it, you used to be a cowman yourself until you got that fool idea of running a hardware store. Seems like you'd remember—" His voice trailed off and he turned his back.

Johnny looked across the room at Virginia, who had returned with the bottle of whiskey. *There* was the reason he had quit his job as Cleve's foreman and used his savings to open a store. He'd wanted to have something to offer her when he asked her to marry him. On sudden impulse, he crossed the room and stood facing her. "You know your father isn't right about this, Virginia. I'm asking you to tell him so, and come with me. I'll take care of you."

Her eyes widened, but she shook her head. "I've waited a long time to hear you say that, Johnny, and now it's too late." She looked across at her father. "I can't..."

But Johnny didn't wait to hear the rest. Pushing past her, he crossed the hallway and went out into the night.

By the time he reached town, Johnny's anger was gone, leaving him with a bitter sense of failure. The settlers, with the exception of Jake Borcherding, hadn't favored his mission in the first place. Sid Blackman, in particular, had insisted that nothing could come of the visit, and that it would just indicate weakness to make the attempt.

At thought of Blackman, Johnny frowned grimly. Blackman was a trouble-maker, and would find some excuse for violence in any situation. But he had a tricky way of arguing, and could back it up with his fists if necessary. It was Blackman who had started the idea that Johnny was a weak crutch, because he wanted to settle things without bloodshed. A loud talker like Blackman could make some of the other nesters forget that Johnny had helped them locate their property, and had given them as much credit as he could afford, gambling on their being able to pay when they sold their cattle.

JOHNNY'S claybank turned in from habit in front of the hardware store, and a voice said softly from the darkness, "That you, Johnny?"

Johnny stiffened momentarily until he recognized the voice. "It's me, Jake," he said. "What keeps you in town so late?" He swung out of the saddle, and stepped up on the wooden sidewalk.

"Thought I ought to see you before anyone else did." Jake moved away from the building, a solidly built man in bib overalls. Johnny had liked the man from the start—liked his quiet good humor and stability. He took his hand now and gripped it briefly,

pleased to think he had at least one friend left. Then he remembered Jake's words, and his pleasure faded.

"All right, Jake; let's have it."

"It's Blackman." Jake's voice was mild, and Johnny knew, in spite of the darkness, that Jake wouldn't be scowling as another man might. "He's over at the saloon, him and most of the other settlers." Jake cleared his throat noisily. "He's been stirring 'em up, Johnny—telling 'em things about you, about how you used to work for Cleve Carlton, and went with the Carlton girl."

Johnny was silent for several seconds while he turned it over in his mind. Just a few minutes ago, Cleve had as much as asked him to leave, considering him an ally of the homesteaders. Now Blackman was convincing those same homesteaders that Johnny was in league with Cleve. It was a miserable situation any way you looked at it, and one in which he stood a good chance of losing everything he had ever hoped to gain. The thought came to him that he could save himself all this grief by abandoning the homesteaders and going back to C-Bar-C, where he would be welcome. It was a tempting thought, but he shook his head. A man had to live according to his principals or he wasn't much good to himself or anybody else.

Jake coughed uneasily. "I didn't say anything to make you sore, did I Johnny?"

"Of course not." Johnny laid a hand on Jake's thick shoulder. "Not you, Jake." He chuckled grimly. "Well, I suppose I'd better go over to the saloon and see what I can do about it."

"Now, Johnny?"

"Why not?"

"You may run into trouble. Blackman's been buying drinks." Jake let out his breath in a gusty sigh. "All right. You've likely made up your mind. I'll go along, in case there's an argument."

There were two saloons in town, the Herdsman, where Cleve Carlton and the other big ranchers went, and Jesse's Place, frequented largely by the homesteaders. Johnny knew without asking that it was the latter to which Jake referred, and he crossed the street and pushed through the batwings.

Even in here, the dust had found its way, to mix with pipe smoke and the fumes of spilled drinks. Two hanging lamps spread a thin yellow light over the room, and Johnny saw the small group of settlers clustered around Blackman at the other end of the bar.

The settlers had seen him come in, but there was no welcome in their eyes. Blackman pushed away from the bar and turned to face him, his feet spread apart. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, and said sourly, "I see you're back, Harding. I suppose you talked Carlton into opening up the waterhole."

Johnny shook his head. "He wouldn't even listen to me. I made a mistake going."

Blackman's thick lips twisted into a triumphant grin, and he turned to the men at the bar. "You hear that, men? He just made us look like fools. Damn it, I said he had no business running out there." The grin faded as he faced Johnny again. "Tell the truth, Harding—did you go out there to help us out, or to tell your old boss how bad off we are?"

JOHNNY looked from Blackman to the others at the bar—Alvin Dubuque, who still owed him for the plow he had used to turn the first soil—Kansas Frase, for whose wife Johnny had brought the doctor from Rockburg. Frase had the decency to look ashamed, but Dubuque met his look without coloring. There were two or

three other settlers at the bar, all of whom Johnny had helped in one way or another. None of them spoke up.

"Well, Harding; how about it?" Blackman was determined to press his advantage. His crafty eyes narrowed, and he added suggestively, "Maybe it was the girl that tolled you out there." He winked. "By grab, she's a wench to make a man..."

"Watch yourself, Sid." For the second time that night, Johnny's temper reached the breaking point. His hand dropped to his gun, then fell away as he remembered that Blackman wasn't armed. For that matter, none of the nesters were. Johnny unbuckled his gunbelt and held it out to Jake, then advanced toward where Blackman stood waiting. Blackman was grinning now, his big shoulders hunched forward and his long arms hanging slack. Johnny knew then that it had worked out the way Blackman had wanted it to, and the realization was bitter. All that remained was for Blackman to beat him in a fight, and he was finished as far as the nesters were concerned. And Blackman was the bigger man, with the look of a fighter.

It was too late now to worry about past mistakes. Johnny moved in swiftly and feinted with his left, following with a hard right. Blackman was caught off guard, but he shook off the blow without even losing his grin. His long arms found Johnny's waist, and wrapped him in a rib-cracking grip. Johnny tried to twist loose, and knew at once that he was up against the toughest man he had ever fought. He chopped at Blackman's head with both fists, but the range was too short to get any power behind the blows, and Blackman only increased the pressure.

Johnny's breath was being squeezed out of him, and he felt a moment of panic. He fought off the temptation to tear at Blackman's arms, an effort which he knew would be futile. Shifting his weight suddenly, he fell over backward, twisting as he fell. They crashed to the floor together, and Blackman lost his hold.

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Johnny rolled away and staggered to his feet in time to see Blackman coming at him with a chair. He threw himself to one side, and the chair glanced off his shoulder, numbing that side of his body. Blackman pitched past him from the momentum of his swing, and Johnny brought the edge of his hand down on the back of Blackman's neck with all his remaining strength. Blackman fell on his face and skidded across the floor.

Johnny tried to move his left arm, but it was still numb. If Blackman recovered, he'd have an easy time of it. Realizing this, Johnny stumbled to where Blackman was now on his hands and knees, grabbed him by the hair, and jerked him off balance. As Blackman's head came around, Johnny brought up his knee into Blackman's chin. The nester's legs collapsed, and he sprawled on the floor.

Johnny turned toward the bar, where the other men were staring at him in silence. He sucked in a lungfull of air, and said thickly, "This isn't the way I wanted it, men. We'll never prove anything by fighting among ourselves." He turned to face the door, and saw Jake Borcherding still holding the gunbelt. He took it and tried to buckle it on, but his left hand was still useless. Jake stepped up to give him a hand, but Johnny shook him off. "I'll manage," he said. "You might take my horse over to the stable if you will. I'm going to bed."

It was still dark when Johnny was awakened from feverish dreams by someone's shaking him. He made a grab for his gun, hanging on the bedpost, then let his hand drop as the intruder said excitedly, "It's me, Johnny—Jesse French."

Johnny put his feet on the floor, and it came to him then that his left arm was usable again, although his shoulder was stiff and painful. He found a match on the table, and lit a candle.

The saloonman blinked at the light, and said ominously, "Something you ought to know, Johnny; they've just burned Dubuque's place."

"Dubuque's? Good Lord, did he get his family out?"

"I don't know." French ran his tongue across his lips. "Ab Cummings came over and told me. He lives out that way." He shook his head. "I never figured Cleve Carlton would stoop to this. By gawd, if I thought..."

JOHNNY was pulling on his boots. "Don't be too sure it was Cleve," he said. "It sounds more like Kroeger's idea, although I doubt if either man would start a fire with the wind blowing like it is. If the grass got started, it might burn them out." He snatched his hat and ran out into the hall. Ten minutes later he rode his claybank out of the livery stable and headed west toward Dubuque's, his fist clenched on the reins. Damn Kroeger, or whoever it was who had started the fire! Now there'd be no holding the homesteaders back.

He topped a rise in the road and saw Dubuque's place below him, the house a glowing mass of embers. Half a dozen men were moving around in the eerie light, some of them using grain sacks to beat out the sparks that threatened to touch off the grass. Fortunately, Dubuque had cleared a space around the house, so it appeared that the fire could be kept in check.

Jake Borcherding was throwing shovelfulls of dust onto the red ashes. He saw Johnny, and shook his head glumly. "The fat's in the fire now, Johnny. You'll never be able to hold 'em back after this." He stopped shovelling long enough to point at two of the nesters who were slapping at sparks with scorched towsacks. "Dubuque's

[*Turn To Page* 80]

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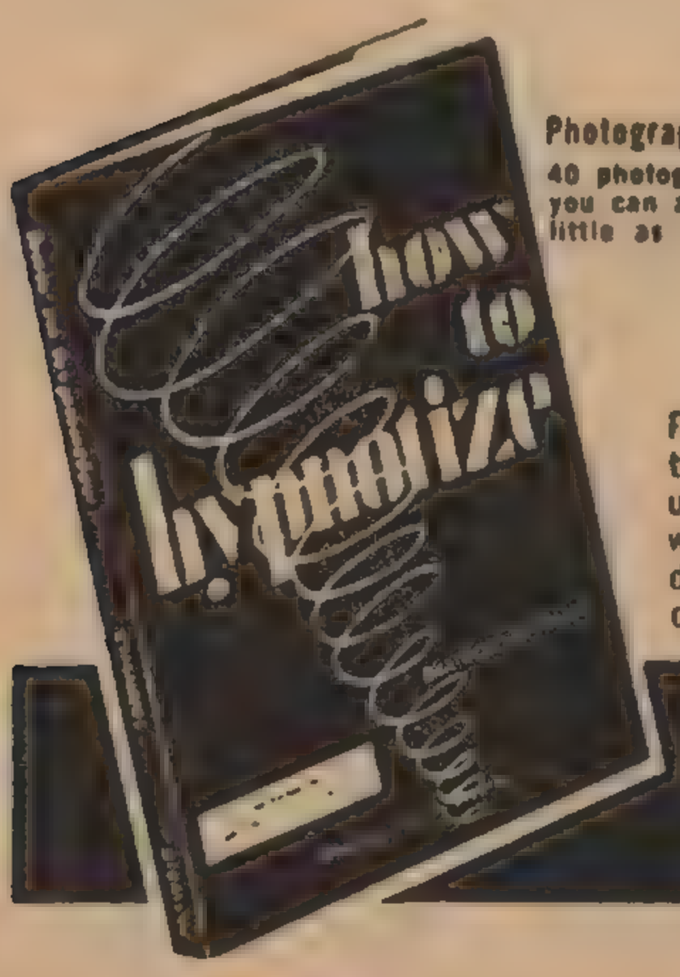

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well ran out on us or we might've saved part of the house." He faced around in the direction of the waterhole and shook his fist. "Damn 'em, there's a limit to what a man can take."

It was the first time Johnny had seen Jake lose his temper, and it gave him an idea of what he was up against. He turned in the saddle and saw Alvin Dubuque staring stolidly at the ruins of his house. Johnny stepped to the ground and moved over beside him. "How about your family, Alvin? Did they get out all right?"

The homesteader turned to stare at him unseeingly for a moment, then anger twisted his features. "They got out," he said thinly, "but it's no thanks to your friends." He turned his back on the fire. "You talk about settling things peacefully, but *they*. . ." he gestured toward the north. ". . .they come around in the night and burn us out."

Johnny glanced around and saw that the other nesters were all listening, even Blackman, whose face was swollen and discolored. He turned back toward Dubuque. "You're sure somebody started it? It couldn't have been an accident?"

"An accident—with *this?*" Dubuque took a scrap of wood out of his pocket and held it under Johnny's nose. It had the unmistakable odor of coal oil.

There was no answer for this, and Johnny made none. Sid Blackman spoke up then, his voice harsh with hatred. "Damn you, Harding, this is your fault. If you'd let us alone we would've settled things before this happened." He moved up into the light, and Johnny saw that he was now wearing a gun in a tied-down holster. It was something to think about, but there was no time to think for Blackman went on fiercely. "You've tried your way. Now we'll try mine!" He whirled to face the other nesters. "I say we give 'em a taste of their own medicine. Who's ready to ride out and burn Carlton's place?"

Johnny studied the men's faces, and realized that they wouldn't be dissuaded now. He thought about Cleve and Virginia. They would probably have time to get away, but no one could save the ranch buildings and the stock. He glanced at the sky, which was beginning to turn gray. By now, the crew would have left on roundup, so there

[*Turn To Page* 82]

Five - Star Tales of Tomorrow

THE WOMAN YOU WANTED
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SCIENCE FICTION

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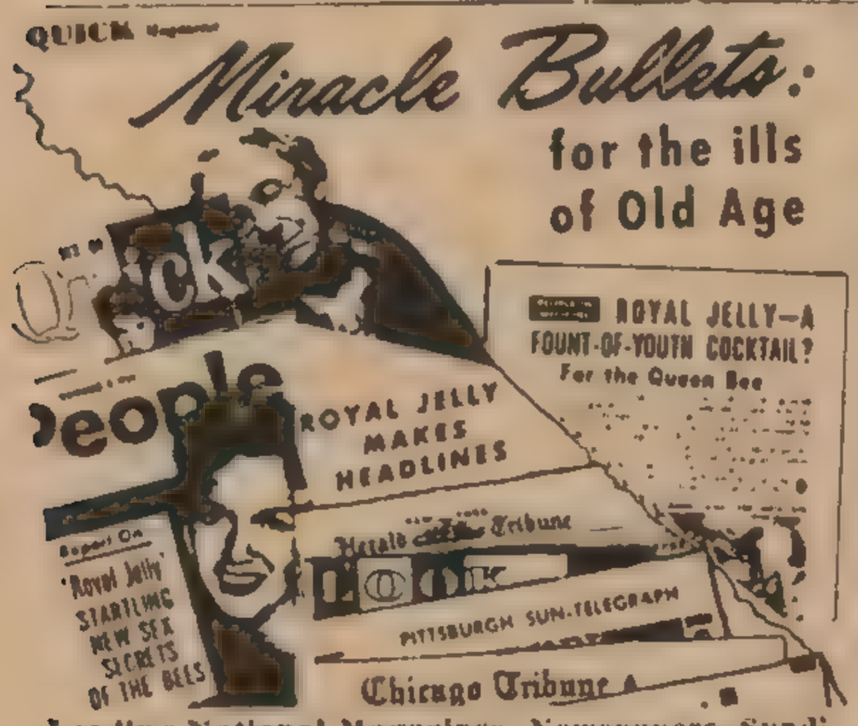
ROYAL JELLY, the Queen Bee's Special Food...ITS SECRET OF PROLONGED LIFE!



Leading National Magazines, Newspapers, Syndicated Columnists, Medical Journals, and Report from Medical Congress indicate the benefits of ROYAL JELLY, a "living" high energy food

Doctors Report "Miracle" Royal Jelly May Change Your Whole Life!

How would you like to awaken one morning and find yourself possessed with a marvelous sense of "well-being," full of New Pep and Vitality? Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could feel increased vigor and enjoy a "new lease on life?" Now...Scientists say this may happen to you!

Royal Jelly May Mean "New Life" After 40

Reports from Europe tell of an 80 year old Gentleman whose physical condition would make a 50 year old envious. The man regularly partakes of Royal Jelly. According to a book published in England, when Russian Officials sent questionnaires to all the Centenarians (people over 100 years old) in the Soviet Union, more than half of them turned out to be beekeepers.

From France and Germany come amazing Scientific Reports of outstanding results obtained with Royal Jelly. One French Authority writes of women over 40 feeling increased sexual vitality and of a wonderful feeling of "youth and well-being" that resulted from continued use of Royal Jelly.

At this moment, in Leading Universities, Scientists and Nutritionists and Medical Doctors are doing extensive work to determine the exact role that Royal Jelly may play in Your Sex Life, Your Health and Your Emotional Condition. These researchers are especially interested in its effects on those who have passed middle age. They are working on Royal Jelly because this rare NATURAL FOOD has been indicated to contain remarkable Energy and Sex Factors.

Doctor Paul Niehans, famous Swiss Surgeon and experimenter with Hormones says: "ROYAL JELLY is an activator of the glands"...Dr. Niehans discovered that many minor disabilities which bother millions of people such as tiredness, irritability, headaches, insomnia, physical and spiritual convulsions, were easy to treat with the Cellular Therapeutics of the Secretion of the bees which we call Royal Jelly.

Jenasol RJ Formula 60 contains pure, natural Wheat Germ Oil (Vitamin E)

Swallow one CONCENTRATED JENASOL RJ FORMULA 60 capsule daily. They combine 8 important and essential vitamins and minerals as well as the miracle food of the Queen Bee. This capsule dissolves instantly, releasing the super forces of Royal Jelly which go to work immediately and reenforce and healthfully strengthens your own natural functions which may have become deficient.

Effects can be felt more quickly with the double potency SUPER-STRENGTH FORMULA—but satisfactory results are MONEY BACK GUARANTEED with either formula. (The price of ROYAL JELLY has been recently quoted at $500.00 per ounce.)

Now You May Benefit from ROYAL JELLY... the "ELIXIR of YOUTH" of the Queen Bee

Two years ago, the world-famous French Nutrition Expert, Bernard Desouches wrote a book praising Royal Jelly as a Life Prolonger and Extraordinary Stimulator of Sexual Virility of the Queen Bee. At present, Doctors and Scientists from many countries in the world, say that Royal Jelly has proved to be a potent factor in matters relating to sexual virility and size and growth of animals.

Here Are Some of the Symptoms of Approaching Old Age which Make Men and Women over 40 feel devitalized and "played out" before their time:

● "Human Dynamos" slow down amazingly ● Dizziness ● Weak feeling ● Vague aches and pains ● Listless, "don't care attitude" ● Lacks recuperating power ● Fatigues easily ● Fails to get rest from sleep ● Sexual weakness ● Loss of mental efficiency and ability ● Unable to make simple decisions.

French University Scientists to Make Thorough Analysis on ROYAL JELLY

Paris—One of the leading Universities in France has decided to make analysis into the benefits of Royal Jelly.

ROYAL JELLY Wins Approval Before Congress* of 5,000 Doctors

The men of Medical Science who have experimented with Royal Jelly, claim that Royal Jelly will perform the function of INCREASING MEN & WOMEN'S WANING POWERS.

Jenasol R. J. Formula 60, in the opinion of these reputable physicians removes any possible danger for the layman in the use of these powerful, concentrated nutritional extracts. This is the latest and possibly the greatest advance in the history of Medical Science. This combination, created under the strict supervision of a Registered, Licensed Pharmacist, and Medical Doctor, named "Jenasol R. J. Formula 60," makes the use of these amazing elements perfectly safe.

Every man and woman who feels "old" and "played out" before their time should seriously consider the use of "Jenasol R. J. Formula 60" to increase their pep and energy.

Royal Jelly Reported to Help Those Suffering From:

Mental Depression . . . Loss of Appetite . . . Sexual Weakness . . . Digestive Disturbances Headaches . . . Decreased Vigor . . . Nervousness . . . Aches and Pains . . . Irritability.

MEDICAL RESEARCH

We have listed below some of the extensive Medical and Laboratory research that has been done with Royal Jelly:

Many authorities still dispute the efficacy of Royal Jelly while others consider it a potential Boon to Mankind.

- *Dr. de Pomiade, 2nd International Congress of Biogenetics, Baden-Baden, Germany; April 5, 1956.
- Dr. Maurice Mathias, Pasteur Institute of Tunisia, October, 1952.
- Cowdry's Problem of Aging, Thomas S. Gardner. (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 8, No. 3, July, 1953.)
- Analyses of Royal Jelly and Pollen, Nevin Weaver and Kenneth A. Kuiken (Technical Contribution, No. 1485 Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.)
- Longevity Factors in Royal Jelly, Thomas S. Gardner. (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 3, No. 1, January, 1948.)

We make no claims for ROYAL JELLY. We have merely accumulated reports that have been made as a result of experimentation and research by Doctors, Scientists, and Nutritionists in many parts of the world.

The Best Laboratories of Europe gave the Doctors of the 2nd International Congress of Biogenetics a great surprise when they confessed that their famous Medical Cream for the skin was prepared with Royal Jelly. The Doctors all knew that with this cream sagging breasts were raised and mamary glands of women were activated.

CAN VITALITY AND SEX DRIVE BE INCREASED WITH ROYAL JELLY?

Let this "Miracle of Nature" which Medical Doctors have acclaimed begin working for you today! Start feeling good again!

LEADING MEDICAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND, FRANCE AND GERMANY: Attest that ROYAL JELLY is one of the richest Natural sources in the treatment of vitamin and nutritional deficiencies...that hogs and guinea pigs fed with Royal Jelly live 20 to 30% longer...chickens fed with Royal Jelly double their egg output.

Observations by Doctors of the Medical Congress Who Took Royal Jelly and Observed its Use Directly

- Royal Jelly gives new energy to those in a weakened state, and greater vigor, more physical strength and spiritual strength to the healthy.
- Royal Jelly alleviates suffering of men and women in their critical years in a sensational manner.
- Royal Jelly acts on weakened, tired eyes, giving instantly a sensation of new light.
- Feeling of tiredness disappears immediately.
- Royal Jelly gives a feeling of increased sexual drive and energy, especially to men and women over 40.
- Glandular studies may lead to new hope for men and women.
- Royal Jelly produces a pleasing state of relaxed well-being and eases tension.

DISCOVERER OF INSULIN
Dr. Frederick Banting

"The most complete Scientific Report on Royal Jelly was prepared under the direction of Dr. Frederick Banting.

"TEXAS A & M COLLEGE has been conducting experiments on Royal Jelly..."

"PROFESSOR G. F. TOWNSEND of ONTARIO AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE is resuming research on Royal Jelly..."

"DR. T. H. McGAVACK has agreed to conduct experiments in Longevity with human beings fed Royal Jelly..."

Life May Begin Again After 40 as Queen Bee's Natural Food Rebuilds Man's Vitality and Drive

Royal Jelly is totally unlike honey, and has baffled scientists since the 1700's. In 1894, some of the mystery was dispelled when Leonard Bordas, a French scientist, discovered that Royal Jelly is secreted by special glands located in the heads of worker bees whose job is to nurse the Queen.

Intrigued by the strange longevity and extraordinary sexual powers of the Queen Bee, leading scientists have been trying to discover the Secret Factor in Royal Jelly that so benefits the Queen Bee.

It is not surprising that Royal Jelly has attracted Medical Attention throughout the world... Here is the substance, the sole diet of the Queen Bee in which lies the secret of the difference between her and the rest of the hive. For the Queen lives to 6 years, whereas the 20 to 40 thousand worker bees and the few hundred drones live but a few short months. The Queen Bee larva looks like all the rest, including those of the female worker bees. But only SHE is fertile, producing some 400,000 eggs annually.

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would be no help from that direction.

Blackman apparently took Johnny's silence for surrender, for he said suddenly, "All right, men; get your guns and follow me. We'll..."

"Just a minute." Johnny's voice was cold, and Blackman turned to scowl at him. Johnny looked around at the nesters, wondering how to go about this. They couldn't see it, angry as they now were, but Blackman's plan would be their finish. Even though they succeeded in burning Cleve out, he could rebuild. Meanwhile, the crew would return, together with the men from the other ranchers. The poorly armed nesters would have less chance than a snowball in hell.

HE LET HIS glance settle on Kansas Frase, who for once seemed to have made up his mind. "How about it, Kansas; will your cows be any better off because Cleve's house is burned?" He shook his head. "Even if you burned all the big places, it wouldn't put a drop of water in your cows' bellies."

Frase let his eyes drop uncertainly, and looked at the other men for support. He rubbed a hand across his mouth and said querulously, "What d'you expect us to do—lie down and let 'em ride over us?"

"No." Johnny knew that they'd never be content to wait. All the way from town he had been casting about for some solution, and a possibility came to him now. "You don't have to lie down, men." He raised his voice, pretending a confidence he didn't actually feel.

"You want water, not bloodshed. All

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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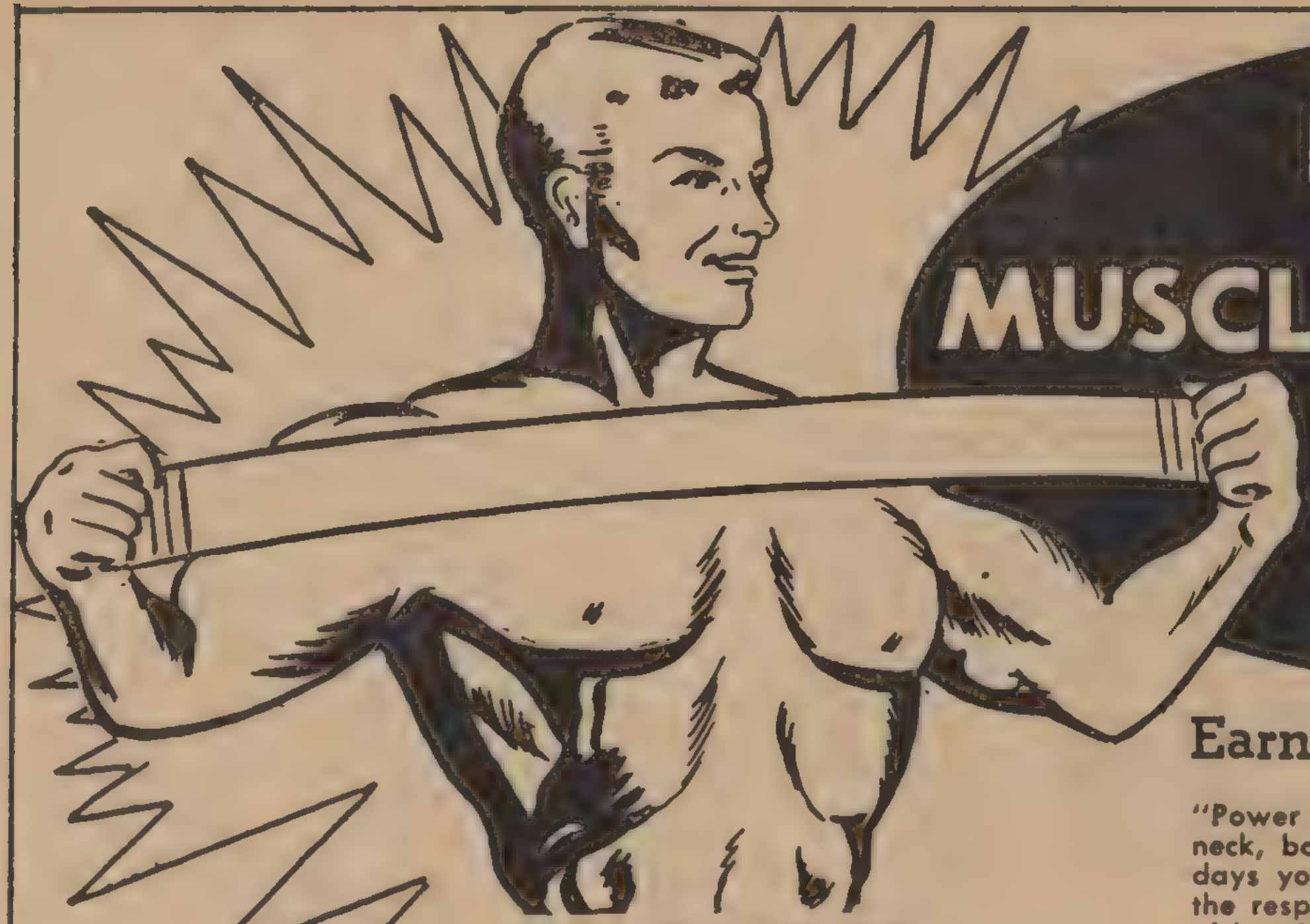

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right, we'll get water; we'll knock out the side of the waterhole, and let the water into the basin."

It was too much for them to grasp. Even Jake looked suspicious. "Hold on, Johnny," he said. "How the blazes do you figure to do a thing like that?"

"Hell—he doesn't," Blackman cut in angrily. "He's trying to trick us."

Johnny ignored the interruption. "Don't forget I was working for Carlton when he made that waterhole. The water used to trickle down into the basin until we dammed it up. You've all got plows, and you know how to use 'em. With all the crews on roundup there won't be enough men to stop us. We'll rip out the side of the hole and let the water into the basin again. Nobody can keep your cows out of *there*."

It was an outrageous scheme, but it would serve to keep the settlers occupied until they cooled off. Furthermore, it actually might work, at least until the ranchers had time to take retaliatory measures. Johnny could see that they were interested.

"It's a lie!" Blackman said suddenly. "Just like all your other big ideas. We can give them ranchers so much trouble they'll let us alone. They ain't got any right to be so big. We'll push 'em back and help ourselves!"

So *that* was Blackman's angle. He wanted to get big without working for it. It explained a lot of things, pos-

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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sibly even this fire, which he might have started to get the settlers aroused enough to fight. Johnny turned to face him, relieved somehow that it had come to a head. "I see you're armed, Blackman," he said quietly. "I've never let a man call me a liar and get away with it. You're no exception."

The fingers of Blackman's right hand curved, and Johnny knew that the tied-down holster had been no accident. And Johnny had never pretended to be an expert with a sixgun. A little nerve began to twitch in his cheek, and he made himself smile to cover it.

"All right, Blackman—now's as good a time as any."

Blackman's shoulders hunched forward and the muscles of his face contorted, but he didn't draw. His hand fell to his side, and he turned away, crossing rapidly to where his horse was tied. He swung into the saddle and dug spurs into the horse's flanks.

Johnny let out his breath in a huge sigh. He looked away from Blackman's retreating figure and saw the nesters watching him tensely. "All right, men. If you've made up your minds, go home and load your plows in your wagons. Meet me at the basin as quick as you can. I'll signal when it's safe to come up to the waterhole."

Jake Borcherding laid a hand on his shoulder. "The guards," he said. "You ain't forgetting *them*, are you?"

"No." Johnny shook his head. "That'll be my job. You other men leave your guns at home." He mounted his horse and headed for the waterhole. He could only hope that the nesters would follow his orders.

KNOWING the lay of the land as he did, it was fairly easy for Johnny to sneak up on the two men who had been left to guard the waterhole. He slipped out of the underbrush and

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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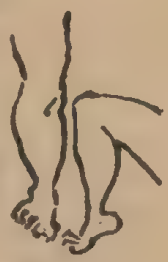

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had them covered before they knew he was near.

"Just stay like you are," he said, and they were smart enough to obey. Johnny moved up and relieved them of their guns. One of the men had worked for C-Bar-C when Johnny had been ramrod, and he stared at Johnny incredulously.

"Ain't you forgetting whose side you're on?"

Johnny shook his head. "I'm on nobody's side. I'm just trying to prevent a war."

The puncher shrugged. "You picked a funny way of doing it—throwing down on two of Cleve's men."

"It's the only way I could think of on short notice," Johnny said, and grinned wryly. He stepped over to the men's horses and untied a coil of rope. "Now if you'll just hogtie your partner here, I'll do the same for you."

The puncher grinned. "They'll sure ride our tail about this, but I guess we ain't got much choice." He nodded at his partner. "On your belly, Tex. You heard what the man said."

When both men were securely bound, Johnny circled the waterhole and scrambled down the slope to the basin, where the nesters were waiting in their wagons. He stepped up on a wagon hub and saw that each wagon had a plow in the back.

"All right, men, the guards won't bother you for a while. Get your teams hitched to the plows and drag 'em up the slope. The wagons can stay where they are." In the faint light he imagined he could see the beginning of hope on the men's faces, and it made him feel a little guilty when he remembered how brief a victory this would be. Of them all, only Jake Borcherding seemed to understand what was going on. He looked at Johnny and lifted his eyebrows, the gesture

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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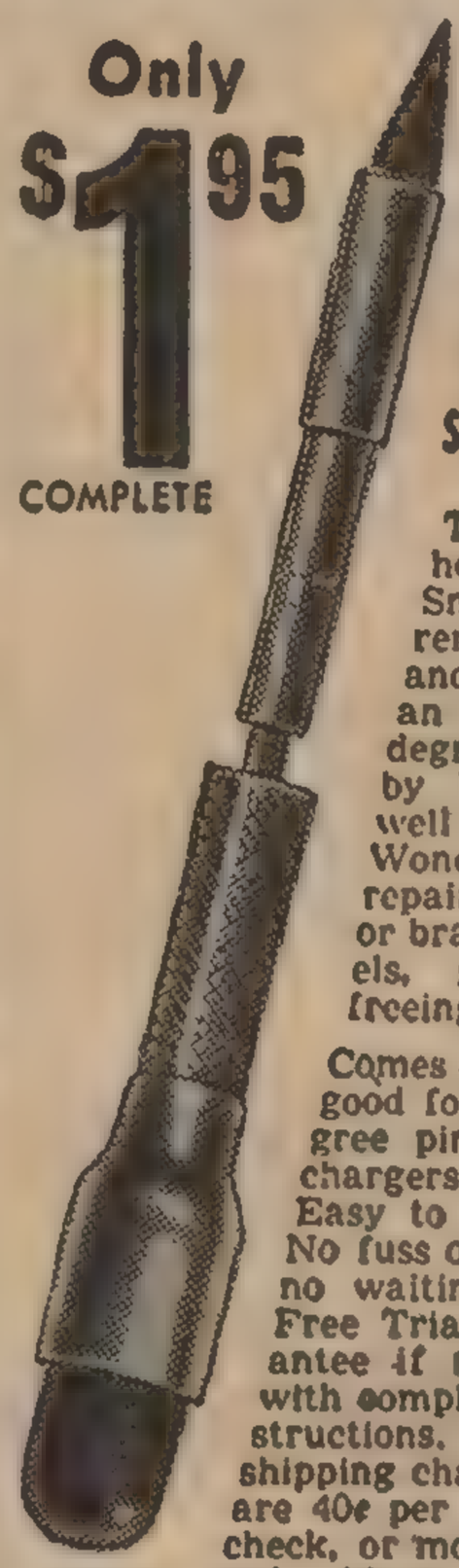

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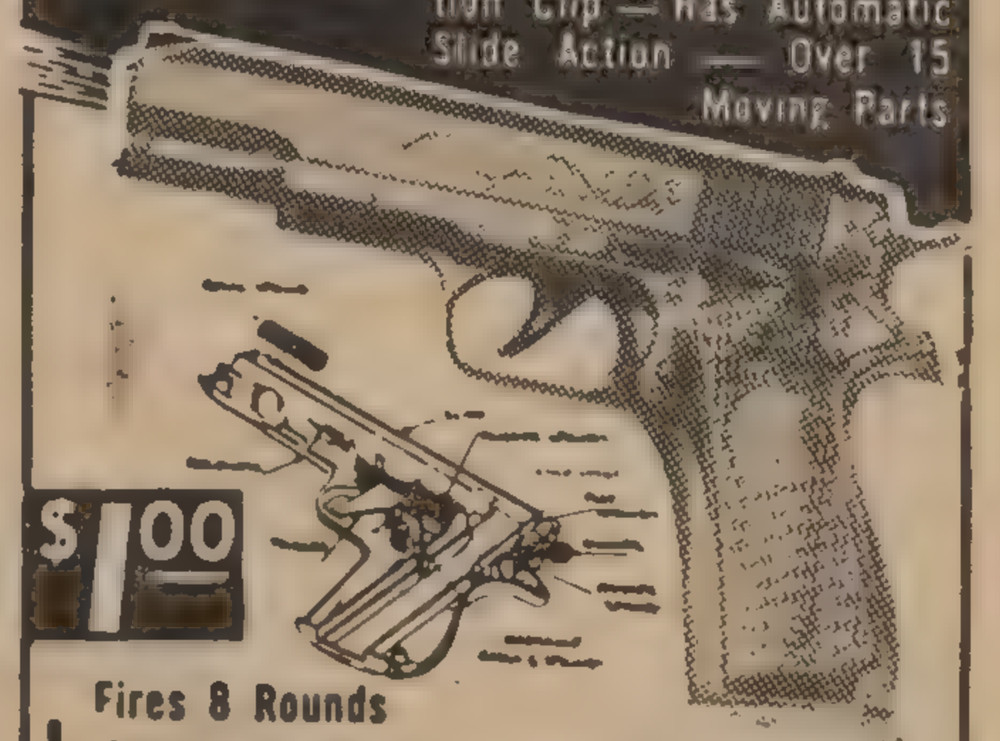

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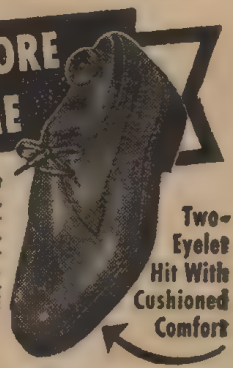

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apparently indicating that he sympathized with Johnny's purpose. Then his expression changed and he stood up in the wagon, staring at something beyond the waterhole.

Johnny whirled to look, and saw a pink glow in the sky. "The grass!" he yelled. "Somebody's touched it off!" He remembered the look on Blackman's face after the showdown, and had the answer. He turned involuntarily in the direction of Cleve's ranch buildings, out of sight beyond the hill, and pictured Virginia and the old man. Cleve was just stubborn enough to try to save the stock instead of making a run for it, and Virginia wouldn't go and leave him.

Johnny leaped into Jake's wagon and turned to yell at the others. "Come on! The wind isn't blowing straight toward the ranch. We've still got time to plow a firebreak if we hurry." He snatched the reins out of Jake's hands and cracked the loose ends over the horses' rumps, startling them into a lumbering gallop.

They crested the hill, and C-Bar-C lay in sight half a mile ahead. Far to the west, a long line of flame was advancing in an ever widening front. Johnny took a quick look over his shoulder and groaned with relief. The other wagons were following.

He pulled the team to a jarring halt, but it was Jake who lifted the plow out of the wagon and fastened it to the traces. Jake tilted the plow into position and looked to Johnny for instructions.

"Just go far enough to save the buildings," Johnny yelled. "There isn't time to do it right." He rushed back to the next wagon, and wrestled the plow onto the ground. Alvin Dubuque pushed him aside.

"I'm better at this than you are." He shot a quick look toward the house. "How about *them?*"

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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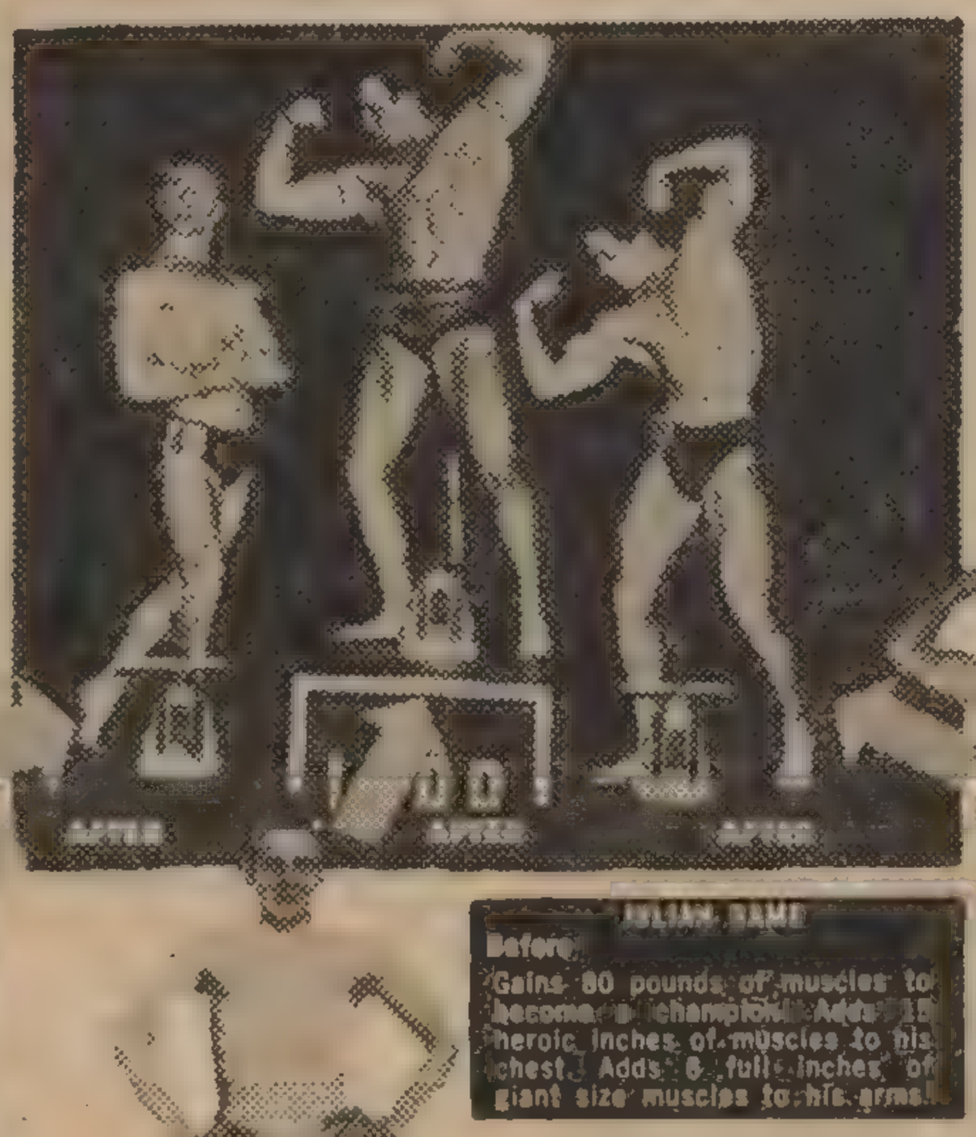

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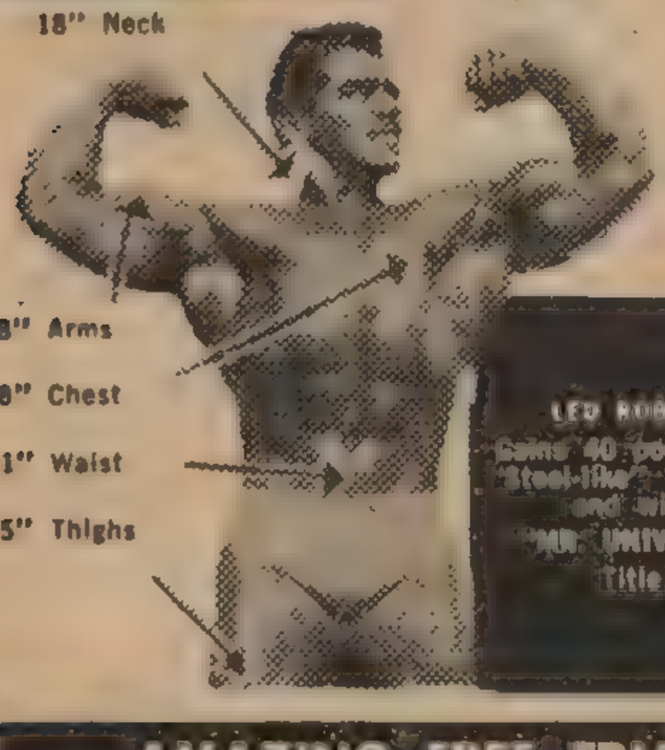

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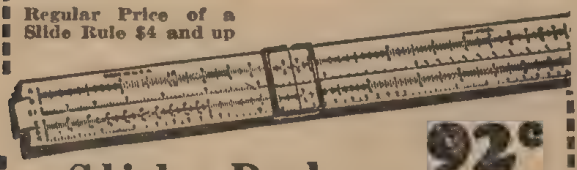

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Johnny lit out for the house, satisfied that the nesters would do whatever could be done here. He drew his gun as he ran, and emptied it into the air.

Cleve Carlton met him in the doorway, his pants pulled on over his nightshirt. There was a gun in his hand, but he shoved it inside his belt when he saw the fire. He started toward the barn, then brought up short and stared at the flame-silhouetted figures of the nesters. "Who...?" He pointed.

"There's no time to explain now," Johnny called. "Where's Virginia?"

"Here."

Johnny turned and saw her in the doorway, the wind whipping her hair back from her face. Relief drove him toward her, but he caught himself and ran toward the horse-trough, grabbing a bucket off the edge of the porch. In spite of anything the nesters could do, there were sure to be sparks.

FOR THE next half hour there was no time for anything but fighting the little blazes that kept springing up all over. Then the crackling subsided, and Johnny stopped long enough to see that the nesters had unhooked their teams and driven them into the yard. Virginia was leaning against the side of the house, her face streaked with soot, and Cleve was slumped on the edge of the porch.

Johnny looked at the nesters, all of them dog-tired, but standing defiantly in a group. From their expressions it was clear that there had been no change in their feeling toward Cleve —they had only done what they thought any decent man would do in an emergency.

He turned toward Cleve. Surely Cleve, at least, would change his attitude after this. But the bleak lines of

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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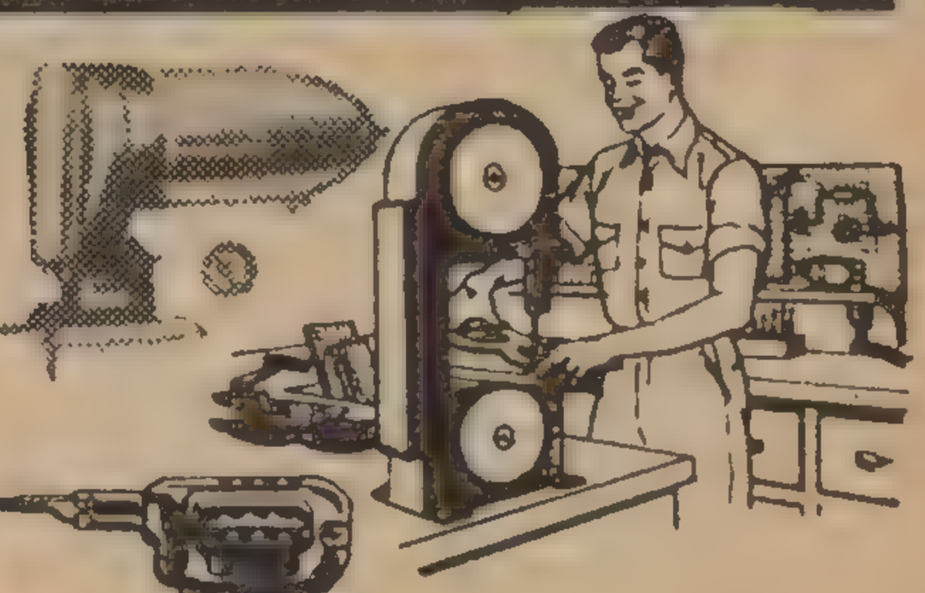

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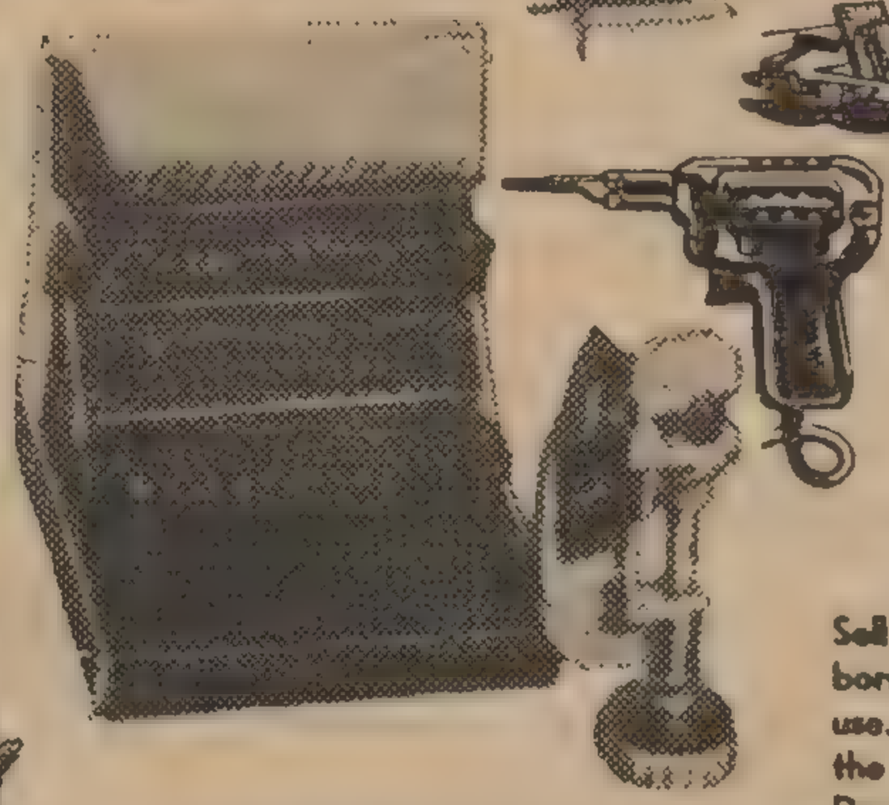

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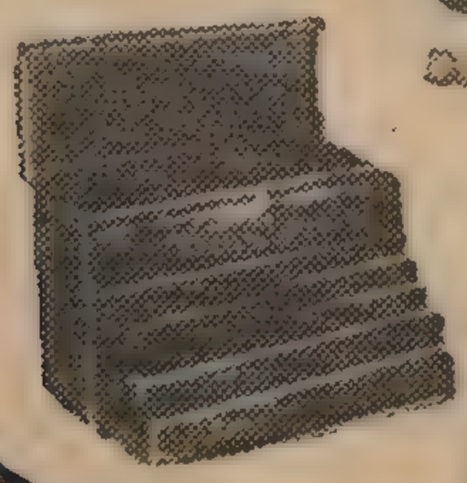

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Cleve's face were answer enough. The old man got heavily to his feet and stared coldly at the nesters. "Before I thank you for saving my buildings," he said, "there's something I'd like to know. Who started the fire in the first place, and what were you aiming to do out here on my land this time of the morning?"

Johnny tried to head him off. "Good Lord, Cleve," he said passionately. "You don't mean that you still . . ."

He heard them coming then, the roundup crew, their horses' hooves thundering on the bare dirt. They pounded to a skidding stop, Dutch Kroeger in the lead, his pistol in his hand. Kroeger turned his angry glare at the nesters. "So you waited 'til we was gone," he said. "By gawd, I expected something like this!" He swung toward Cleve. "I warned you, Carlton; you can't trust a stinkin' sodbuster!"

Cleve's face showed a little displeasure. "Hold on, Dutch," he said. "I ain't sure yet if they started it. I only . . ."

"Well, *I'm* sure." Dutch's grin was savage. "We caught one of 'em in the act." He yanked his horse to one side, and pointed with his pistol. "There's Sid Blackman, or what's left of him. We caught him trying to get away." He cursed. "Damn a man who'd start a fire in a wind like this!"

Johnny looked at the faces of the other riders, and saw nothing but contempt. He remembered that his gun was empty, and that the nesters—acting on his orders—had left theirs at home. Everything had gone wrong, and it was mostly his fault. He moved over to stand between Kroeger and the little bunch of nesters. Kroeger had no way of knowing that Johnny's gun was empty—there was that much of a chance.

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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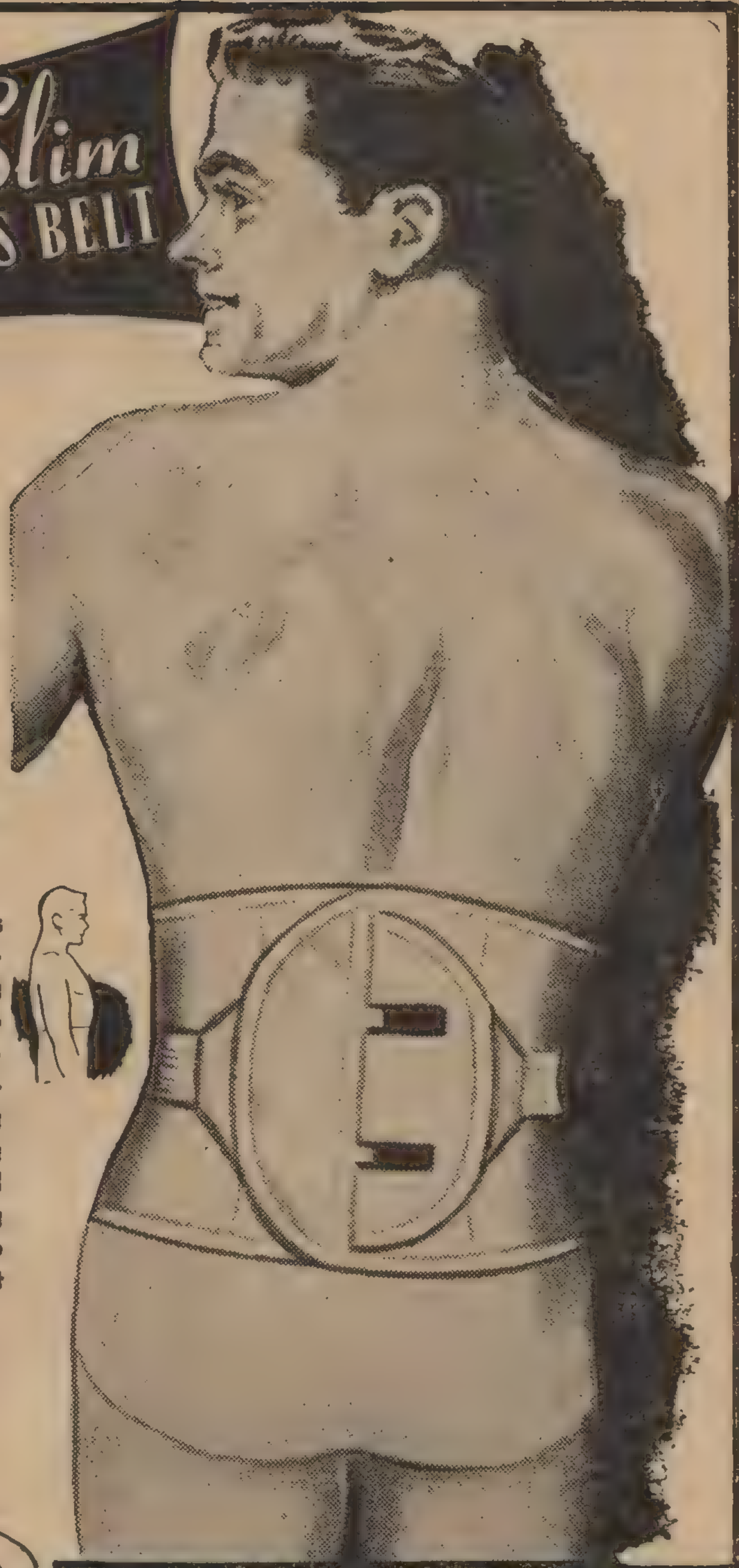

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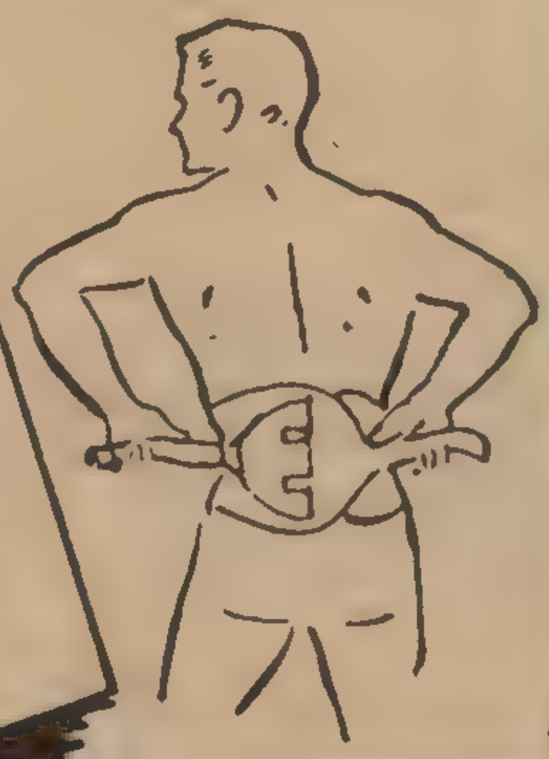

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

"Don't be too quick to talk about starting fires, Dutch," he said. "It strikes me this isn't the only fire that's been started in this wind. How about Alvin Dubuque's place?"

Kroeger stiffened in the saddle. "That was..." He broke off suddenly, and flashed a quick look at Cleve. "Damn you, Harding; I don't know what you're talking about."

Johnny's eyes widened. Kroeger hadn't been quick enough. So he *was* the one who had set fire to Dubuque's. It wasn't a trick of Blackman's after all. And apparently Cleve had known nothing about it. Johnny let his hand fall close to his gun. Maybe if he could turn this into a personal thing between himself and Dutch... He twisted his lips into a cold smile.

"Like you said, Kroeger—damn a man who'd start a fire in this wind. And damn a man who'd strike a match to a house with women and kids asleep in it. Well, I'm not a kid, and I'm not asleep. Let's see how you like those odds!"

It was a hopeless bluff, and Johnny knew it. Kroeger's gun was already in his hand, and there was nothing he could do but use it. But in killing Johnny, Kroeger would be admitting that he had started the fire at Dubuque's. That might bring Cleve to his senses.

Kroeger's lips drew back from his teeth, and his eyes narrowed to slits. He hesitated only a second, then the muzzle of his gun came up. As it did, something hit Johnny in the back of the knees, and he plunged on his face. Kroeger's bullet whistled harmlessly over his head.

JOHNNY tried to whirl aside, but Jake Borcherding was pinning him down, apparently trying to shield him from Kroeger's next bullet. The gun

spoke again, but Johnny felt no blow. He twisted around to look up at Kroeger, and saw Kroeger's gun dangling uselessly from a limp finger. Then Kroeger slumped forward and fell out of the saddle.

Stunned, Johnny turned his head and saw Cleve frowning at Kroeger over the barrel of his smoking six-gun.

The old man shook his head in disbelief. "Kroeger," he said. "So Kroeger tried burning 'em out." He let the gun drop out of his hand. "And I've been listening to everything Kroeger told me. Good Lord! What a fool I've been!"

Jake had rolled aside, and Johnny got to his feet. He moved over and laid a hand on Cleve's shoulder. "You aren't the only one, Cleve. Blackman was one of *us*." He looked around at the punchers. "Put your guns away, boys. There's been enough killing here for one day."

Cleve took a deep breath. "Yes," he said. "You can put 'em away for good, as far as the homesteaders are concerned. They won't get any more trouble from me." He looked across at the group of nesters, and smiled wryly. "I don't know what to say, men. There's water and grass for all of us. I was just too stubborn to admit it." He let his gaze settle on Jake Borcherding. "What you just did, mister—that took guts. I reckon I've been wrong about you plowboys."

Jake looked embarrassed. "It wasn't much, Mr. Carlton; I just happened to know that Johnny's gun was empty. I heard him empty it."

"Empty!" Cleve turned to stare at Johnny. "You mean..." He sighed. "Dammit, men, I'll try to make this up to you." He looked at Dubuque. "About your house— I'll see you get a better one." He turned toward Johnny. "How about it, boy; are you satisfied now?"

Johnny wasn't listening, nor was Virginia, but Cleve just smiled. It was pretty clear that they had no complaints.

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